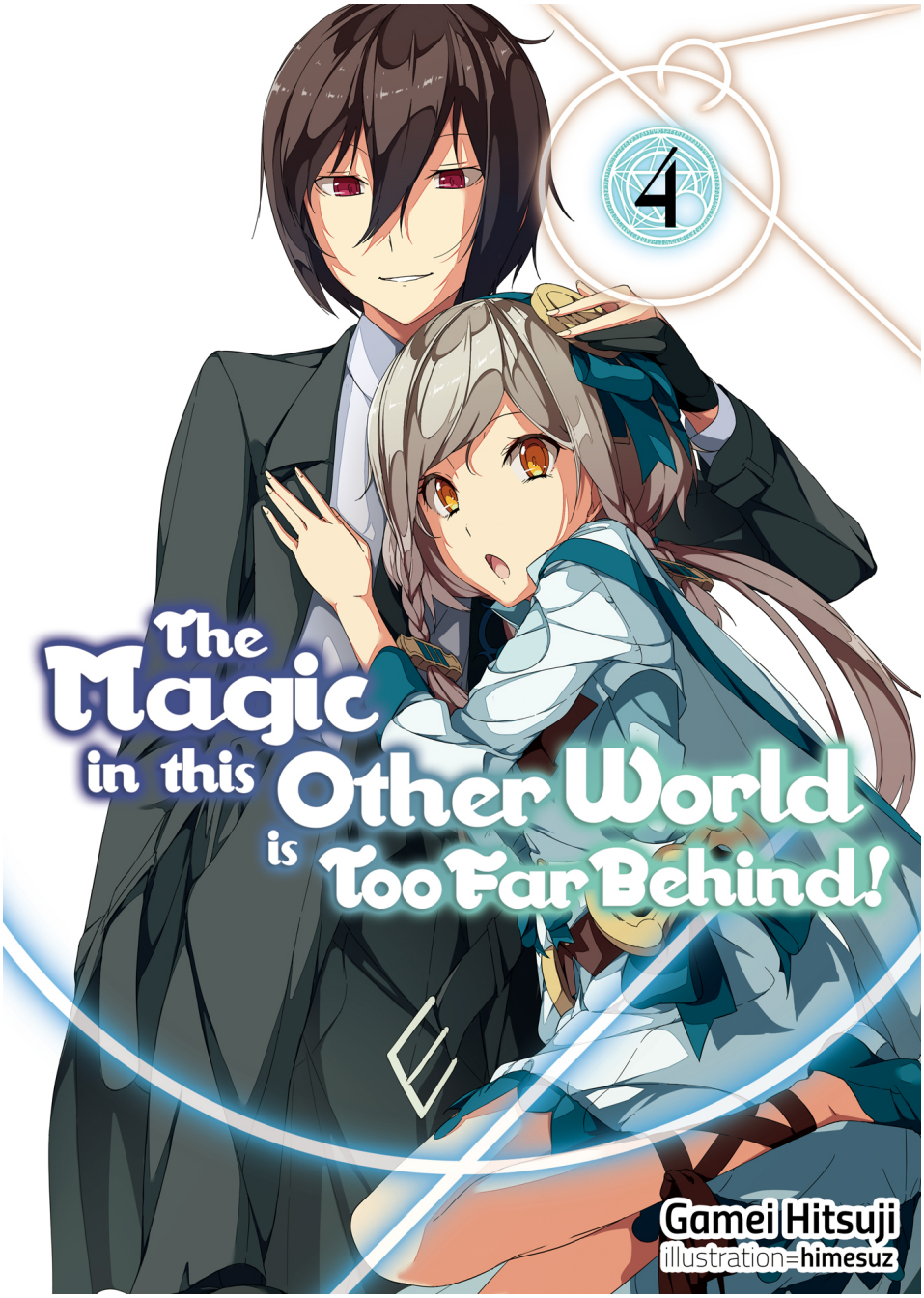

4
The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind!
Gamei Hitsuji
illustration=himesuz


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illustration=himesuz
The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind! 4


The four people who hold the key to solving the coma incidents in the imperial capital
Lefille Grakis
"Thanks to the circle you made, I feel like I'm getting back into my stride quite well."
Liliana Zandyke
"I do not wish... to run away."
Yakagi Suimei
"I just thought I'd come and arrest the culprit."
Felmenia Stingray
"Even if it is impossible, I will force my way through!"



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Prologue: Reiji and Company, Back Again in the Empire

Staring up into the air, all that filled his vision was the clear blue sky. Back in his hometown, towering buildings overhead would crowd the sight, making it impossible to see nothing but pure sky. But here in this other world, there was nothing to obstruct his view. And on this particular day, when he arrived at the border between Astel and Nelferia, he was greeted by this piercing blue sky.

It was now several days after Suimei had tried to convince Liliana on that fateful evening. The hero of Astel and his party had just arrived at the fortress that stood on the national border of the Nelferian Empire. Reiji finished up with his entry inspection ahead of the others, and was now gazing at the land that spread out before him. Mizuki, who finished her inspection next, took her place by his side.

“So we’ve finally reached the Nelferian Empire, huh, Reiji-kun?”

“Mm, we sure did.”

Mizuki was pointing a sweet smile towards him as he replied with a gentle expression. After departing Kurant City, they’d left Hadorious’s domain on horseback. They traveled along the large highway that connected Astel, Nelferia, the Saadias Alliance, and the Self-Governed State. Up until reaching the border, the scenery along the way had been verdant. But upon entering Nelferia, the amount of greenery decreased as the terrain changed. The geography here showed the characteristics of dry land carved out by ancient rivers. There would be more plant life once they reached the oasis of the capital, but they would not see vast forests like they had in Astel again for some time. Mizuki offered up her thoughts on the scenery.

“I was thinking this earlier too, but this place sure does look kinda like the Grand Canyon, doesn’t it?”

The landscape before her reminded her of a familiar scene she often saw in pictures and on television. Just as she said, the territory around the Grand Canyon was quite similar. Right before them was even a large ravine that had a very narrow yet deep river flowing through it.

"What do you think of it all, Reiji-kun?"

"Huh? Oh. I don't think it's quite as rugged-looking, but it does have a very similar impression, yeah."

"Right? Man, we have to pass through here *again*... Ugh."

"Do you find it tedious?"

"I mean, last time we came through here, I ruined my shoes..."

"Now that you mention it, that did happen, didn't it?"

Mizuki was making a face like she was already tired and hung her head in a most crestfallen fashion. She looked down at her feet.

"And my feet are gonna get so sore..."

"You have magic, so won't that part be manageable?"

Reiji was being optimistic, but it didn't do much to lift Mizuki's spirits. She continued pouting. Most of the road ahead of them was well maintained, but there would be a stretch where they had to dismount their horses and walk. It was a particularly rough stretch of the path with bare rocks jutting out everywhere. Mizuki, who was unused to such trekking, ended up ruining her sneakers that she'd brought with her from their world in the process. It turned out they were one of her favorite pairs, so she was quite depressed when it happened. She then had to switch to new shoes, which were nowhere near as comfortable, and couldn't hide her disappointment.

"But you know, Reiji-kun, using magic to soften the pain all the time is a bother too."

"I guess so. After the effect wears off, you just have to keep casting it again and again, huh?"

"Uh-huh. But you must have it nice, Reiji-kun. Your feet don't hurt at all, do they?"

"That's... Well, that's because I have the divine protection."

"Hey, can you share a little of that with me?"

Mizuki looked up at Reiji with a charming smile and her hands clasped in front of her chest, but...

"That's impossible."

"Cheapskate, cheapskate, cheapskaaate!"

Mizuki adorably puffed out her cheeks in disappointment. He

felt bad for her, but the impossible was simply impossible. If it was within his power, he gladly would have split the blessing with her without her even asking. But knowing there was nothing he could do, Reiji turned his gaze back towards the ravine. Passing through this place a second time was somehow moving to him.

"Passing through here again... It's kind of a strange feeling..."

And as he was getting carried away by his emotions...

"Of course it is. After all, you jumped clean over it last time, Reiji-sama."

"Wha?! I... I... I..."

Reiji turned around in response to the voice that had called out to him. Titania had finally finished with her inspection too and was now talking to him with a smile on her face. Reiji could only return a cramped smile.

"But Tia, I thought you guys forgave me for that already..."

"Certainly, though I believe I'm still allowed to complain about it from time to time."

"Tia's right, Reiji-kun. We said we'd forgive you, but no one said anything about forgetting it."

"Aww, come on, Mizuki..."

His friend had betrayed him. Both Mizuki and Titania were standing next to Reiji now, and the two girls gave him the same skeptical look. As they teased him, the female knight in their party, Luka, came out of the fortress. Upon closer inspection, she was carrying something unfamiliar in her hands, and she walked up to Titania with it.

"Your Highness, you forgot this."

"Oh, thank you, Luka. Was there something I—?!"

The moment Titania, who had been smiling with Mizuki just now, turned to look at Luka, she suddenly froze in place. Reiji was confused as to why she seemed so surprised. It wasn't that dramatic of an event to have forgotten something, after all. Mizuki curiously cocked her head to the side as well.

"What's wrong?"

"Th-Th-Th-Th-There is nothing wrong, Mizuki!"

Titania was in a complete fluster. A little to the side, Reiji was looking at the package that Luka was holding. It was long and cylindrical, and produced a metallic clang when it moved.

"That's... a sword, isn't it? Is it yours, Tia?"

"What?! Reiji-sama, when did you...?!"

“So you were holding on to something like this? A sword, huh? That’s a little surprising.”

“That is, um... It’s, um...”

“Oooh! Hey, hey! Could that be a treasured sword of the royal family? The kind of ornamental sword that isn’t very useful practically, but that royalty absolutely must carry with them whenever they go out on a journey as a sign of their authority?!”

“Huh?! Oh, yes, that is correct! It is just as Mizuki says! It is exactly that!”

“I don’t know what it is, Tia, but you’ve been acting pretty strange for a while now...”

“It is just your imagination, Reiji-sama!”

Titania denied it with such force that beads of sweat were now falling from her forehead. She was unable to maintain her composure. Quite unusual for the princess, she was a complete mess. Mizuki, standing beside her, seemed to remember something and looked up into the sky as she changed the topic.

“A sword, huh...? That reminds me. Your sword’s gotten pretty worn out, hasn’t it, Reiji-kun?”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

It was just as Mizuki said. Reiji put on a worried expression as he drew the sword from his waist. Emerging from its sheath, it was quite obvious the blade was covered in nicks. The cause of the damage was the encounters they’d had with demons as well as the big fight with Rajas. Not only was he wielding the sword with only a limited amount of experience, but the clashes he’d had with Rajas’s fists had done a number on the orichalcum blade. While examining its condition, Titania cleared out her throat and spoke up.

“I believe there will be skilled blacksmiths here in the Empire. If they cannot repair it, I believe we should have you a new one made. Personally, I would prefer it if we could hold out until we reach the Saadias Alliance or the Self-Governed State though.”

Titania seemed quite insistent on that last part, which got Reiji a bit curious.

“Are the blacksmiths in the Alliance amazing, Tia?”

“Yes. I believe I have mentioned before that the Saadias Alliance was formed when many small countries came together. A long time ago, when they were deciding on the leaders of the Alliance from amongst the member countries, the representatives

from each country competed with swords."

"Ah! So that's why everything to do with swords is quite popular there to this day, right?"

"Yes, when it comes to sword techniques, smithing, and strong swordsmen, the Saadias Alliance is in a league of its own."

Reiji then hoisted up his orichalcum sword and gazed far into the distance.

"A country of swords and swordsmen, huh? I'd love to get in some training in a place like that."

Right after saying that, Reiji laughed and tried to gloss it over as a joke, but Titania answered him seriously nonetheless.

"If I remember correctly, of the Seven Swords, three of them should be in the Saadias Alliance. If we have the opportunity to go there, we may be able to meet them."

"I've been hearing about the Seven Swords quite a bit, but are they strong?"

"The Seven Swords are praised as the strongest swordsmen in all the northern continent. It is said that the skill of each one is equivalent to a thousand soldiers."

"A thousand?! That's amazing! One warrior matching a thousand! It's like a real-life Lu Bu!"

Titania's explanation brought out Mizuki's inner chuuni.

"Even here in the Empire, there is a swordsman given the name of 'Lonely Shadow.' After achieving military acclaim in many night battles and ambushes, he became known as the foremost swordsman in the nation. The armies of the nations at the Empire's southern border have borne witness to his strength in the most unexpected places. He's so prolific that there are even songs about him people use to scare their disobedient children."

"Like, if you don't listen, he'll come for you, right? That's incredible."

Reiji was honest in his admiration and, for some reason, Titania suddenly put on the air of a know-it-all.

"I have spoken of various swordsmen, certainly, but I don't think it should be necessary that you seek tutelage under any of them, I must say."

"Why's that?"

"Your instincts with a sword are quite good, Reiji-sama. And you also learned the fundamentals at the castle, so instead of trying to learn someone else's style, it would be better to improve yourself

as you have been."

"You think so, Tia? Do you have an eye for that kind of stuff?"

"What? Oh, i-it's just a feeling! I mean, you're the hero of Astel, after all!"

"...I think you're right, Reiji-kun. She's definitely been acting weird.

"I told you that's just your imagination!"

"Well, regardless of whether or not I take any training, it's impossible to head for the Saadias Alliance right away anyways."

As Reiji stated that, he returned his sword to its sheath and then turned a serious expression towards Mizuki and Titania.

"We're headed off to investigate the movements of that princess from the Empire we met earlier, right? Tia, what do you think about that?"

"I wonder... I do not know just what that man's intent is."

It was rare for Titania to show her displeasure so plainly. It seemed she really and truly did not get along well with Hadorious. The duke had told them in Kurant City to go to the Empire, and Reiji remembered quite well how she'd exploded in protest. In the end, however, they all had Gregory to think of and were left with no choice but to comply.

"That man... The next time we meet, I'll see to it that he's the one grinding his teeth."

"Wow, Tia is super motivated."

"Of course I am!"

It seemed she was set on the warpath of getting even with Hadorious. She had her fists clenched tightly, and there was a raging fire in her eyes. Reiji then decided to ask about the source of all this conflict.

"It seems like you've always felt this way about him. Did something happen with Duke Hadorious in the past?"

"Huh...? Yes, well, various things have happened."

Titania let her gaze wander and quickly looked away. She was being quite vague, but Luka, who was standing behind her, spoke in her stead.

"That is because Her Highness once had a match with Duke Hadorious and—"

"L-Luka!"

"What's this? A match? Tia had a match with Duke Hadorious?"

"Oh? What kind of match?"

Reiji and Mizuki were both quite interested, but Titania had no intention of answering. Instead, she turned her frustrations on Luka.

“Luka! You are being far too careless today!”

And as she was raising a fuss, Gregory and Roffrey finally finished their inspection as well and came over to the group with the horses. They were met with the sight of Mizuki cheerfully waving to them, and Titania looking like she was completely at her wits’ end with Luka. Reiji was softly watching over them, but then cast a distant gaze into the depths of the Empire. The weather was perfect for a journey, but Reiji was still worried about Hadorious’s instructions. Just what was waiting for them beyond this point?

Chapter 1: Geo Malifex

After Felmenia rendezvoused with Suimei, the housemates of the Yakagi residence were all assigned their own duties. Lefille largely stayed at home to take care of the cats and the cleaning, while it was decided that Felmenia would be in charge of the cooking. And of course, as the owner of the house, Suimei had an important duty assigned to him as well.

Indeed, Suimei was to devote himself to studying the hero summoning circle, as well as teaching Felmenia about magicka on the side. But he had his share of everyday responsibilities as well, including heating up the bath and managing their finances. In fact, on any normal day, he would be filling the tub with water and heating it up right about now while Lefille and the new bath-loving convert Felmenia waited impatiently.

But this was no normal day. It had been a few days since Suimei had gone to confront the small shadow known as Liliana, but Suimei was still quietly recuperating from their encounter. That night, her berserk dark magic and the following fight with the sinful figure it summoned had done serious damage to his astral body. As a result, Suimei still wasn't back to his normal self. He could scarcely even move.

During the panic that followed when the tall shadow showed up and Liliana escaped, he'd been unable to give chase. So despite being seriously outnumbered, the tall shadow also managed to evade all its pursuers and escape into the dark of the night. After putting up with Elliot's questions, Suimei somehow managed to drag himself back home. But showing up in such a terrible state, he gave Felmenia and Lefille quite a scare. They were nursing him, but he'd ended up causing quite a bit of inconvenience for them.

He knew that he should be out continuing his investigation, but there was nothing he could do in this condition. The girls had their own responsibilities to see to, and now they were taking care of him as well. Suimei was currently half sitting up on the bed in the living room as Felmenia came to refill his water pitcher. He called out to

her, both by way of gratitude and an apology.

"Sorry."

"Do not worry about it. Please just take your time to rest until your body gets better."

Felmenia replied with a smile, but it still didn't sit well with Suimei.

"No, I can't really do that."

"What do you mean, you... Ah."

In a somewhat ditzy tone, she came to realize what he meant. Indeed, Suimei didn't even need to say what was worrying him. It concerned Liliana's situation. On the night of their encounter, Elliot and his group had seen Liliana's face before she heeded the order of the tall shadow and vanished. It was still unknown whether she'd met up with the tall shadow after the fact, but there was no denying that she was in quite a predicament either way. There was plenty of evidence to raise suspicions about her now.

They hadn't yet heard that she'd been apprehended, but they still didn't know what was currently going on. And Suimei had been worried about the countless possibilities since that night. But coming out of the fog of such thoughts, he realized Felmenia was staring at him with her eyes narrowed and her lips tightly pursed. Her expression, which looked like she was extremely critical, conveyed so much more than that. She was also extremely sympathetic and worried. Acknowledging that, Suimei spoke up in resignation.

"I get it. I'll wait until I'm better."

"Please do. I know you're worried about Liliana Zandyke, Suimei-dono, but you have to understand that Lefille and I are worried about you, too."

"Sorry."

"...I thought you were more of the careful type, but it seems you're actually quite reckless."

"Yeah, I hear that a lot."

"Is that something to laugh about...? If you keep acting like this, Lefille will scold you again, you know?"

Felmenia reproached him with a bit of honest and concerned advice, but Suimei still gave her a bitter smile. After he'd returned to the house that night and his condition had stabilized, what awaited him was the long and angry scolding of the tiny big sister Lefille. Suimei could still hear her saying things like "you always

make me worry" and "don't ever be so reckless again" in the back of his mind.

But she was exactly right. Suimei was well aware that he'd been somewhat careless to get caught up in all this. But the same had been true in Lefille's case not long ago. He'd thought that it would get better over time, but it seemed that it wasn't so easy to shake your natural disposition. And while Suimei was having this conversation with Felmenia, Lefille came into the living room carrying a heap of baggage.

"Heave... ho! Heave... ho!"

She was adorably putting all her effort into carrying what she had in her hands. It wasn't particularly heavy, but it completely blocked her view of what was in front of her. It was quite a precarious position to be in, and Felmenia called over to her in a gentle tone accordingly.

"Lefille, it's dangerous to carry too many things at once. Shouldn't you put some of that down?"

"It's alright, Lady Felmenia. A little bit of luggage that's taller than I am is nothing. You know, in my original form, I used a greatsword that was taller than I was too... Heave-ho!"

"Lefi, be careful."

"Yeah, thanks."

Suimei expressed a bit of his kind concern as well, but Felmenia sat there looking rather confused. It seemed she found it most strange how this small child always spoke of such things.

"Suimei-dono...?"

"Hmm? Oh. Most of my body's functions are dedicated to healing right now. My mind isn't exactly working properly."

After turning back to Suimei, Felmenia realized he was lying down and blankly staring into space. To use magicka to restore his astral body, he had to enter this kind of trance-like state. All Felmenia could do was watch on with loving concern as she sat by his side.

"I cannot tell very well by the look of it, but is it bad?"

"If it were any normal injury, it could be healed right away with magicka. But what was injured this time was my astral body, not my physical one, which can't be easily healed with magicka the same way."

"...You're saying that you can heal physical injuries with ease?"

"Well, yeah."

Suimei answered Felmenia quite plainly as Lefille finished putting away the baggage and returned to them. She then also took a seat next to the bed with a surprised look on her face.

“So injuries to the body are no obstacle for you, huh? You sure do say some amazing things without realizing it... Anyway, you said the astral body, didn’t you? I remember you talking about this before, but didn’t you prepare defenses for something like this?”

“Dark magic is too peculiar. The magicians of our world, even the demonologists, don’t use that kind of dangerous curse in that way any more, after all. It was perfectly reasonable for me to assume no one in their right mind would use an attack like that... Well, either way, in short, my preparation was lacking or I was simply negligent. I... ah...”

In the middle of his explanation, Suimei started fumbling over his words. Since his mind wasn’t operating at full capacity, he was having trouble putting his thoughts together properly.

“It seems like this isn’t a good time to ask questions.”

“It appears so. It seems our difficult questions will have to wait.”

“Yeah, thanks guys.”

Suimei was grateful the two girls were so considerate of him and his condition. Felmenia then suddenly seemed to remember something and stood up from her chair.

“That’s right! Suimei-dono, I made you something to eat. Please wait a moment.”

There was a hurried pitter-patter as Felmenia ran off to the kitchen, and she returned shortly with a wooden bowl in hand. Inside was a pure white, steaming soup dotted with perfectly circular, tender-looking beans.

“Here, Suimei-dono. This is pearl bean potage. Enjoy.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Suimei received the bowl of potage and beans, though he barely even looked at it. With his eyes closed, he took a spoonful and slowly lifted it to his mouth. However, with the vast majority of brain function dedicated to his recovery, he was doing so in a daze and his movements were shaky.

“Suimei-kun, that seems dangerous.”

“Sorry.”

“In that case, Suimei-dono, please pass me the bowl and spoon.”

“Sure.”

Suimei handed the bowl and spoon over to Felmenia. She then scooped up some of the potage with the spoon and smiled.

“Okay, Suimei-dono. Say, ‘aah!’”

“L-Lady Felmenia, I’m sure that Suimei-kun would never... What?”

“Aah...”

When Felmenia opened her mouth and urged Suimei to imitate her, he did so without reservation—he couldn’t afford such a thing. Felmenia promptly stuck the spoon in his open mouth, and Suimei took a bite of the soup. Lefille’s jaw dropped as she witnessed something she never would have imagined Suimei doing willingly.

“...Suimei-kun, are you that defenseless?”

Surely there was absolutely no way Suimei would do something so embarrassing under normal circumstances. And if he was willing to do it now, it had to be a sign of just how bad off he was.

“Sorry about this, Menia...”

“Think nothing of it.”

Lefille leaned forward in a daze while watching Felmenia, who was smiling sweetly.

“Lady Felmenia, Lady Felmenia! I want to do it too!”

“Certainly.”

“Now, Suimei-kun, say ‘aah.’”

“Aah...”

As she’d hoped, Suimei also obediently opened his mouth for her. There wasn’t a single hint of resistance or unwillingness from him. He simply quietly chewed the food offered to him. Observing the compromised Suimei, the two girls exchanged excited glances.

“This isn’t so bad. Suimei-kun is cute.”

“Indeed he is.”

The normal Suimei would be valiantly protecting his two beautiful housemates. But now it was their turn to take care of him. Suimei would undoubtedly want to crawl in a hole later when he remembered such embarrassing memories, but that didn’t seem to matter right now.

“All right, Lefille, it’s my turn now.”

“Of course, Lady Felmenia.”

Until the contents of the bowl were completely emptied, they took turns feeding Suimei the potage.

★

Sitting on the southern side of the imperial capital was the massive Castle Groschler. It was the tallest structure in all the Empire. It was the seat from which the emperor governed the state and listened to the advice of the nobles. As the political center of the Empire, it also served as the nation's main governmental office. It originally stood quite firmly as a fortress city, and over the course of its long history, it had withstood many crises that threatened to topple the Empire. Its impressive architecture was widely known even outside the country.

In its administration room, a crimson red carpet covered the floor and a crest-bearing flag hung from the ceiling. This luxurious room could be said to be a symbol of the emperor's authority. It was a place where important people gathered to push their opinions on each other and their subordinates. There was a tense air in the room right now, accompanied by a sinister feeling underneath it. Rogue Zandyke detected it immediately upon entering the room. Keeping up his usual stiff expression, he bent a knee before the prince sitting atop his throne.

"Colonel Rogue Zandyke of the intelligence division, reporting in response to your summons, sire."

With his head down, Rogue presented himself as one would expect in the presence of royalty. After announcing himself, one of the elderly statesmen in the room told him to raise his head. Rogue obeyed, and lifted his eyes to behold the young man in elegant garments that was looking down on him. This was the first imperial prince of the Nelferian Empire, Reanat Filas Rieseld. Even in Castle Groschler where powerful men frequently butted heads, he was a talented individual who handled all state affairs flawlessly whenever the emperor was absent. And before Reanat, Rogue once more bowed down.

"It is good to see you in high spirits, Your Highness. I would like to ask you of a trifling matter, but was His Imperial Majesty not responsible for government affairs today?"

As the emperor of Nelferia was getting quite advanced in years, the day-to-day affairs of the nation were split between him and the crown prince in turns. This relieved some of the burden on the emperor, and gave Prince Reanat a firm foundation in the business. And on this particular day, it was supposed to be the emperor's

shift. When Rogue mentioned this, Reanat put on a faint smile and glanced at the throne next to him where the emperor ordinarily sat.

"His Majesty is in the Ruby Palace. It seems he will be unable to tend to governmental affairs today, thus I have come forth. Good grief, His Majesty's moodiness sure is problematic... Heheheh."

Reanat let out something of a strange laugh as Rogue bowed his head even more deeply once again. At the mention of the emperor, who'd run off to one of the imperial villas, the Ruby Palace, to play around with women, the prince must have been internally sighing. Realizing as much, Rogue waited for the prince to recollect himself.

Reanat then suddenly ceased his stifled laughter. The last few notes of it that hung in the air were like a premonition of the change in the atmosphere. As Rogue assumed they were moving on to the main topic, he stiffened a bit and put himself on guard for what Reanat had to say. Propping up his chin with his hand supported by the throne's elegant armrest, the prince spoke.

"So, Rogue, are you already aware of the reason that you have been summoned here today?"

"...Though it may be presumptuous of me to say so, I believe it would be about Liliana."

"That is correct. This concerns the culprit behind the coma incidents, and whether that may or may not be your daughter. She was spotted at the scene of the crime the other day, but then fled and has yet to be found. Have her whereabouts been determined since then?"

"No, we have exhaustively searched for her, but we have still been unable to establish her whereabouts."

"Has she not returned to your residence?"

"It is just as I said."

After Rogue's short reply, one of the elderly statesmen spoke up.

"Perhaps you're sheltering her? She is your daughter, after all."

"No, I would never do such a thing..."

"Oh? According to the military police, the victims of these incidents were all particularly high-ranking nobles. It's not impossible to conceive that some young upstart like yourself is using their daughter to enact some sort of scheme, is it?"

The elderly statesman's words were roundabout. He was implying that Rogue was making a move to improve his status by taking out the people who would stand in his way. However, Rogue

denied this.

"I have heard that not all of the victims were high-ranking individuals."

"Shameless! The vast majority were those who regarded you with suspicion, including those lower in status than you!"

The statesman's aggressive and somehow contrived voice echoed through the air. Following it were murmurs of agreement from all sides. Suspicions against Liliana filled the room. In this situation, even the nobles who were Rogue's allies were unable to speak up in his defense. As the statesmen were getting worked up, Reanat let out a deliberately loud sigh.

"...Will you cease that? It has not yet been determined that Liliana is the criminal."

At Reanat's behest, the loud voices of discontent clamoring in the room quieted down in an instant. Even the statesman who first cast blame on Rogue withdrew immediately. It was as though they'd all been trying to leave a bad impression of Rogue on Reanat and the other neutral nobles, and were content to back down when they felt they'd made their point. Rogue could sense stifled laughter in the silent room. After observing that the atmosphere in the air had calmed down, Reanat began speaking again.

"Starting that kind of argument in this place will get us nowhere. First we must search for Liliana, who is under suspicion, and put all of our strength into investigating the incidents."

"Naturally."

The statesman who had been raising a fuss readily assented to Reanat's plan. But then, as if staging an ulterior motive, he immediately followed up with his own input.

"I believe there is something that we must decide on before that, however."

"Something that we must decide on...?" Rogue asked skeptically.

"Responsibility, is it? In that case, you are certainly correct."

Rogue knit his brow at the statesman's vague declaration, but Reanat had immediately caught on to his intent. He then directed his cold gaze at Rogue.

"If the investigation proceeds, then your daughter will eventually be found. If, at that time, Liliana is determined to be the criminal, what will you do?"

"Please wait a moment, Your Highness. Hasn't it not yet been

determined if Liliana is to blame?"

"But in the case that she is, how will you take responsibility? That is the matter at hand right now."

One of the statesmen summarized Reanat's meaning for Rogue. Surely they were being too hasty in determining a punishment so soon. As Rogue discreetly glanced over at the statesman, he could see him laughing with a smirk. It was obvious that they were planning on pinning false charges on Liliana. But perhaps because Reanat held Rogue in high regards, he added on to the statesman's summary.

"Rogue, both you and your daughter are great assets to the Empire. I would also like to believe she is innocent. However, you must also know that our country has strict laws. Thus, to prepare for the worst case, this is something that we must decide."

One of the statesmen chimed in again there, adding, "Imperial Military Guidelines article 12, clause number 3. A colonel like yourself wouldn't make light of that, would you? When the time comes, I believe that you should also wish for a suitable punishment."

"So, Rogue," said the prince, "do you have some sort of answer for us?"

Rogue waited for everyone to be silent, then responded to Reanat's question.

"...My daughter's failures are also my failures. I will relinquish my rank in the army, and step down from my seat as one of the Elite Twelve."

"Understood."

As Reanat's acknowledgment echoed through the room, one of the statesmen raised his voice once more.

"That is how it should be. I believe it is appropriate for the colonel to take responsibility for his own daughter's actions."

"Is that not a little severe?"

"We are talking about the one ultimately responsible for things ending up in this state. It is only proper... Don't you think so, colonel?"

"...I understand completely."

Under pressure, Rogue once more bowed down. Observing all this for a short while, Reanat then spoke up.

"The fact that a resolution to this incident has been delayed is something His Majesty is also taking seriously. With demonic

activity on the rise and a potential invasion on the horizon, we cannot have internal turmoil in the nation that goes unresolved."

The noble who made the first statement eagerly agreed with the prince, adding, "You are most right. We must earnestly dedicate ourselves to the investigation. However, it seems that the Holy State's hero is currently involved as well."

"I am aware that it will be difficult to get involved. However, it is also true that at this rate, we will not get anywhere. Therefore, with regards to the investigation of this case, there will be a change."

"A change, Your Highness?"

"Indeed. Up until now, the military police and the intelligence division have been working together on the investigation. The investigation headquarters is integrated between the two of them. So for the time being, command of headquarters will be entrusted to this person."

Reanat issued a brief command for someone to be let in, and the door opened. The one who emerged and walked to Reanat's side was...

★

The knock of a visitor at the front door echoed throughout the Yakagi residence in the imperial capital. Felmenia went to get it, and quickly returned from the entranceway to report. In a sense, it was exactly as Suimei expected.

"Suimei-dono, it's the military police of the imperial capital."

Felmenia delivered this news with a grave expression, and Suimei calmly acknowledged what she said. At present, Suimei was now in much better physical shape after wholly devoting himself to his recovery over the last few days. He wasn't quite back in peak condition, but he was at least back on his feet and could manage his everyday life again.

For the time being, he wanted to make up for all the time he'd lost while he couldn't move and was wondering what to start with. This happened to be one of his main considerations. The two girls, however, looked most concerned. Lefille, who was standing next to Felmenia, was the next to speak up.

"The military police... Suimei-kun, what do we do?"

"Let's see... For now, let's just meet with them."

“But once you do...”

“I know.”

Indicating that he had properly thought it through, Suimei headed to the entranceway where the military police were waiting. Depending on the situation, there was the possibility that things could deteriorate quickly, but nothing would happen at all if they just left them waiting. As he approached, Suimei greeted the policeman who was waiting in the entranceway, who returned a courteous bow. His uniform was extremely neat and well kept, his conduct was lively, and his words were also very polite.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am affiliated with the Empire’s military police, Third Regiment. You are Suimei Yakagi-san, correct?”

“Yes. What business brings you here today?”

“I will get straight to the point. I would like you to accompany us, Yakagi-san.”

The policeman politely replied to Suimei, who was feigning ignorance. And as his reply indicated, there were several other officers standing outside the door. Suimei guessed that they were planning on taking him to the station and thoroughly questioning him about the events of that night. Suimei answered the man in a somewhat troubled voice.

“I see... My apologies, but I’m in rather poor health at the moment. Would it not be possible to leave it for another day?”

“That... I’m afraid not.”

“Meaning?”

“In the event you do not comply with our request, the brass has ordered us to bring you along by force.”

It was a rather violent approach. However, the military policeman who delivered this news didn’t seem fond of the idea either. He was currently rubbing his forehead with his fingers. This was likely because he sympathized with Suimei’s condition and did not really want to force him. But now that he knew force was on the table, Suimei knew that he wouldn’t be able to get out of this. Even if he used magicka to slip by this time, another member of the military police would simply come by and ask again later. In the end, the situation wouldn’t change.

“We’re aware of your circumstances, but I’m afraid I must ask you to come with me. Will you?”

The military policeman once more politely asked Suimei to

comply. Lefille, who was standing behind Suimei, tugged at the cuff of his sleeve. As he leaned down towards her, she gave voice to the anxiety she was feeling deep down inside.

"Suimei-kun, I have a bad feeling about this..."

"Yeah, me too. But I think I don't really have a choice other than going along here."

"Is that okay?"

"I want to get a better handle on what's going on anyway."

Suimei wanted to determine more than just Liliana's location. Currently he had Felmenia gathering information for him, however he was still in the dark on how the government's investigation was going. He was just planning how to make his move, so the timing of all this was actually quite opportune. But even after telling Lefille that, the sour frown on her face said she wasn't entirely convinced. The one who tried to change her mind was Felmenia. Trying to put on a brave, trustworthy front, she boldly stepped forward.

"Lefille, I will go along with them. That way there is no need to worry."

"Okay... I'll leave Suimei-kun to you."

Lefille squeezed out a few dejected words of assent. It seemed worry for Suimei wasn't the only thing on her mind. Lefille was impatient with the current situation. After shrinking, she had to resign herself from taking part in any conflict. She was unable to properly do things that she once did with ease, including defend herself. Suimei glanced over his shoulder at her and could see the mounting frustration in her tiny face. Still gripped by the image of her lonely figure, Suimei left the house with Felmenia.

★

Suimei and Felmenia were now walking down the street, escorted by several military policemen. The officers were positioned both in front of and behind them. It very much so looked like they were being taken into custody, but they were neither suspects nor criminals. In truth, they were being handled very courteously by the police.

According to Felmenia, the soldiers and military police of the Empire were very strict in terms of discipline. Thanks to that, their behavior on the whole was quite exemplary. Suimei recalled hearing something similar when he arrived in the country with

Lefille. Since the Empire's army was so strictly disciplined, it was well known even among the other nations for its caliber. It sounded somewhat analogous to the German army's strict discipline. It was entirely possible that, much like Germany had once in the past, the Empire was progressing down the path of modernization as a militaristic nation.

The design of the streets and residential areas in the imperial capital of Filas Philia differed from those of the royal capital of Astel in that it was more modern. From what Suimei had heard, this was something else that stood out in the Empire over the other nations. If things continued here like they had in Suimei's world and Nelferia developed enough that it could recreate the first and second Industrial Revolutions, it was entirely possible that they would repeat the same failures of Suimei's world as well. Nature and mystery were still in harmony here, but there was no way of knowing if that would remain true forever.

"Suimei-dono, it's been quite a while since you got some fresh air, hasn't it?"

"Hmm? Yeah, you're right."

Just as she said, it had been several days since Suimei had stepped outside. Due to the damage to his astral body, he'd been bedridden all this time. He didn't even have the leisure of taking a relaxing stroll. And perhaps because he hasn't been outside in a while, the scenery of the city looked a bit restless to him.

The citizens of the imperial capital appeared to be agitated. Suimei stole glances at the people they passed by, and it was like they were all on high alert for some unseen danger. Even the children who were running around outside seemed fearful and didn't appear to be enjoying themselves. As Suimei was about to put this impression into words, Felmenia guessed his thoughts.

"While you were convalescing, Liliana Zandyke was put on the wanted list. The imperial capital has been in this kind of state ever since."

"I expected this to an extent, but it's become quite a stink, huh?"

"It is because the identity behind the culprit has been made known. The people must feel like the danger is at hand."

"But we're talking about a local soldier. This level of fear is a little..."

"Liliana Zandyke was always someone with a reputation for

using strange, powerful magic. She holds a title as part of the Elite Twelve and was appointed a special position within the military; she has always been recognized as a symbol of fear within the country. Thinking of it that way, this attitude in regards to her seems quite natural."

"To the regular citizens, that's all this looks like, huh?"

Felmenia gave a nod, but Suimei could only let out a sigh at the situation.

"Even though she's just a child... No, *because* she's a child."

Normally, acquiring strength took a number of years of dedication. However, defying all expectation, Liliana was a genius mage even at her young age. The fact that she held the strength despite being merely a child was something that frightened a great many people. On top of that, there was the strange way she spoke and carried herself, which only intensified that impression.

Liliana had plenty of enemies to begin with, but in light of recent developments, it seemed the entire city had turned against her. She wouldn't be able to show her face anywhere. There was no telling what would happen to her if she did in a world like this.

There was the possibility that the tall shadow was harboring her, but she wouldn't necessarily be any better off that way. What the shadow had said to Liliana that night sounded very much like words of temptation. Thinking about the way they were using her, Suimei didn't have a hard time imagining that they wouldn't hesitate to cut her off and cast her aside.

While Suimei was staring off into space thinking of such things, Felmenia suddenly began speaking to him while casting magicka. There was no change in what Suimei heard of her voice, but it was absolutely silent to everyone else. She was speaking to him in a magickal whisper.

"You're quite concerned about that girl, aren't you, Suimei-dono? I have heard you only spoke to Liliana Zandyke on a few occasions, so why would you go so far for her?"

"Is that weird?"

"What? No, that's not really what I meant, but..."

"It's fine. Even I know it's a little strange." Suimei flashed an awkward smile and began staring off into the distance. "How do I put it? There are times in this world where the only solution is to quietly give up, right? I hate that. Happiness lies ahead for those who refuse to give up, so being forced to do it is a terrible thing,

you know?"

"Suimei-dono..."

That was truly how he felt. Suimei simply couldn't bring himself to accept that resignation was the right answer. He couldn't abide the idea that people were left to drown in a sea of tears with no hope of salvation. That was how sorrow multiplied. And that girl was drowning even now. Suimei recalled what she'd said that night.

"Nobody needs me for anything but fighting."

Those words that came directly from Liliana's mouth were nothing more than a lamentation, a sign of grief over her own misfortune. She was perpetually ostracized. And those were words of someone who was dearly clinging to their place in the world to establish their own existence. That was why Suimei was unable to look the other way. He couldn't leave things like this. And while Suimei was pondering her whereabouts, Felmenia asked him a question.

"The reason you want to return to your world, if I'm correct, is because even there, you have something to fight for?"

"Well... Yeah."

While giving his short and vague reply, Suimei looked at his surroundings. He then realized something.

"Now that I think about it, did they not impose martial law?"

The atmosphere in the city was different, but there were still people walking around. It was clear no limitations had been placed on the citizens or their movements. In a dense, walled city like this, the likelihood of bumping into criminals was fairly high. Normally, until the criminal was caught, there would be restrictions placed on the citizenry to prevent any unnecessary moving around outside. But contrary to what Suimei expected, the streets seemed to be as busy as they ever were. The tradespeople and dwarves were all still going about their business as usual.

"With regards to that, the hero from the Church of Salvation... Elliot-dono's parade is coming up. The scheduled date is approaching quickly, so it seems enforcing any such restrictions would pose quite the problem."

"I see..."

If they invoked martial law it would certainly affect the upcoming parade. Martial law could be a demoralizing thing for the public, which would inevitably undercut the celebration for the hero and any attempts the government was making to inspire the

people. There were masses of foreigners pouring into the capital to see the parade too, so it would be quite a blow to the imperial capital's tourism revenue if they imposed something like a curfew. So with little other recourse, the government was forced to allow people's lives to continue as they normally did. Now having a grasp of the situation at hand, Suimei turned to the military policemen.

"Excuse me, but isn't it about time that you inform us of our destination?"

"We are accompanying the two of you to the south plaza of Filas Philia."

"The south plaza?"

Suimei knit his brows together upon hearing that answer. He was sure they were taking him to a station for questioning, so hearing they were headed to a plaza was a bit puzzling. Thinking about it, the military police, being taken away, a plaza... Adding altogether, the image of a guillotine popped into Suimei's mind, however unlikely that was under the current circumstances.

"Why a plaza?"

"Her Imperial Highness Graziella is waiting for us there."

Suimei raised an eyebrow at receiving a second unexpected answer. This little mystery was only growing more mystifying. There was no way for him to intuit what was going on. If she was waiting for them, it had to mean that she was the one to summon them. But Suimei had no memory of getting involved with the nobility of this country. Why would a princess be waiting for him? As Suimei was mulling over his suspicions, Felmenia leaned in.

"Her Imperial Highness Graziella is the Nelferian emperor's third heir. It is said that she once split the ground beneath her enemies on the battlefield and swallowed them. She is a master of the earth attribute of such renown that she was given the title of Geo Malifex. She is called the strongest mage in the Empire."

"Huh... But still, why is that strongest mage in the Empire summoning me?"

Suimei couldn't connect the dots between this strange series of incidents. He knew it couldn't all be completely unrelated, but he still didn't really have a clue as to why he was being summoned. He articulated this, but even the military police wouldn't answer him. Was it that they didn't know either, or that they couldn't say? Suimei wasn't sure, but they appeared to be troubled as well.

"Her Imperial Highness has something she would like to speak

with you about."

"What's that?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't tell you..."

It seemed more and more likely that they didn't know. There probably wasn't a need to tell mere escorts anything. Suimei gave up on trying to get anything out of them and used magicka to whisper to Felmenia.

"Menia, what kind of woman is that imperial princess?"

"Just as I said before, she is the strongest mage in the Empire. She has an intense personality, and is the type to calmly do impossible things."

"...Now that I think about it, you said she was there when Reiji defeated Rajas, right?"

"Yes, I was also present at the time and we had exchanged a few words. She seems to be the determined type. Please bear in mind that she is not someone that can be dealt with by ordinary means."

"I see..."

As the southern plaza slowly came into view, Suimei could feel a storm coming and stroked his chin. Just like Lefille had said earlier, he had a bad feeling about this.

★

The park at the south end of the imperial capital of Filas Philia was often called the Nobles' Plaza. The vast majority of its visitors were high society. It was situated in one of the upper class districts of the city, and since the local nobles invested quite heavily in it, it was far more ostentatious and pompous than the other plazas around. The brick roads and flowerbeds throughout were well maintained, and unlike the central plaza, there were no shops in the area. Residential buildings surrounded the park, and there was one particularly large mansion situated in such a way that it seemed to use the plaza as its courtyard.

The scale of the building was grand and the entire exterior was built from palm-colored bricks. The stairs out front fanned out to greet variegated beds of plants. It was just the kind of residence one would expect someone in a very high position or perhaps their children to inhabit. Instead, however, it was currently occupied by military police and soldiers who all seemed to be bustling as if there

were some emergency. Suimei wasn't sure about the reason behind all this, but it was likely that the nobles were unwelcoming of any intrusion on their lifestyle and that there was some discord between them and the military.

Amidst all this, Suimei and Felmenia arrived at their destination and were told to wait in the corner of the plaza near a pavilion by the military police. Assuming that Graziella would be there, they headed in the designated direction and spotted a familiar figure from a distance. He had a fairly effeminate silhouette, a supple figure, blond hair, and blue eyes accentuated by long eyelashes. He was mistakable for a girl at first glance, but this was the beautiful hero Elliot Austin. He was gracefully seated on the red bricks surrounding a flower bed while talking to his magical priest attendant, Christa.

"You're..."

Suimei unintentionally let out a word of surprise. Hearing this, Elliot stood up.

"I see. So you were also called here?"

Elliot seemed surprised as well, but only let it show for an instant before brushing back his blond hair. He then spoke with a slight amount of cynicism.

"Are your injuries healed already?"

"What, were you worried about me?"

"Do not joke around. There is no way that I was."

"That's true."

While joking around with Elliot, Suimei felt an unpleasant gaze fall on him. Looking for the source of it with his head cocked to the side, he spied Christa. It seemed that she had a hard time accepting the frivolous way Suimei was speaking to Elliot. Between the green braids that fell down on either side of her head, she was making a severe, high-strung face. On the other hand, when Elliot spotted Felmenia, he immediately made a pass at her.

"Fem-san too, I see. It's been too long."

"Y-Yes... It's good to see you again."

"There is no need to be so humble. I wouldn't mind if you were more carefree around me. Nevertheless, that platinum blonde is as beautiful as ever."

Elliot flashed a kind, brilliant smile that was drastically different from how he treated Suimei. It seemed he had mistaken Felmenia's awkwardness as nervousness. Obviously Felmenia was

mostly feeling self-conscious about being addressed by the fake name she'd made last time, but there was no way for Elliot to know that. After calling out to Elliot two or three times from the side, Christa deliberately cleared out her throat.

"Ahem, Elliot-sama!"

Christa called his name like she was threatening him, to which he responded by looking at her with a smile.

"What is it, Christa?"

He was either that oblivious, or he was just playing dumb. She then quite bluntly urged him to restrain himself.

"Are you not getting a little too intimate with them?"

"I'm only trying to get along with Fem-san. She may become our comrade, after all. Isn't that alright?"

"That..."

Christa was perplexed at receiving an actual plausible explanation. Watching Elliot as he looked down at Christa, Suimei could see a hint of a bully's expression on his face.

"My, my, Christa, I forgot you were a bit of a jealous woman. Whenever I get along with other girls, you're always like this."

"Wh-Wh-What are you saying, Elliot-sama?! I am not!"

"Really now?"

Elliot was now poking fun at Christa and waiting on her next move. To anyone watching them, it only looked like two beautiful people were flirting with each other. And forced to witness this after being dragged out of his house while he was still recovering, Suimei was a little pissed. While scowling at Elliot, who was trying to build himself a love triangle...

"You should just explode."

"What's that?"

"Shut up. It's nothing."

Despite saying that, Suimei continued to mumble the word "explode" over and over to himself like some sort of curse. The other three had no idea what he was saying, and could only cock their heads to the side. As Suimei was making no attempts at hiding his irritation, Felmenia turned to the other two.

"Why are the two of you here?"

"...Were you not informed?"

"No, we just came along at the request of the military police. We were told that Her Imperial Highness Graziella would be waiting for us, but were not told the reason."

“Is that so? The fact is...”

Felmenia was asking, but after arriving at the plaza, Suimei had an idea as to why they’d been summoned. If both he and Elliot were here, then there was an eight or nine out of ten chance that it was something related to the coma incidents. After all, that was his only connection with this man. If they had been summoned together, that was most likely the reason. In the middle of their conversation, Christa seemed to realize something and leaned over to whisper to Elliot.

“Elliot-sama.”

“I see... So they’re finally here.”

Upon hearing her whisper, Elliot turned around. Following his lead, Suimei and Felmenia turned in the same direction. They spied a single woman emerging from the pavilion with a small entourage. She appeared to be in her twenties, and rather than “graceful,” the term “heroic” would better describe her majestic looks. Yet she was still quite beautiful. Her deep burgundy outfit was far more luxurious than anything the other soldiers and officers were wearing, and on top of it, an embroidered imperial army coat was draped over her shoulders. Based on that alone, she appeared to be the most important person in the whole army.

After spotting her, Felmenia cautiously exhaled her name: Princess Graziella. This was the woman who’d called them here. The fact that she was dressed in military garb despite being an imperial princess was likely attributable to her position as one of the Empire’s Elite Twelve. The way she brushed aside her long, wavy, blonde hair also gave off a rather rough impression for a princess. But above all else, Suimei could see a premonition of trouble in her blue eyes.

As she drew nearer, the atmosphere in the plaza gradually transformed. The air became heavy. Was this the pressure she exuded as a princess, or as a mage? At the very least, it was very clear she was the one in charge here. As Suimei quickly put up his guard, Christa fell to her knees. The fact that Elliot only bowed with a brief nod was likely owing to his status as a hero. Reiji had done the same in Castle Camellia. Suimei and Felmenia took a hint and both knelt down as well.

“Has everyone now gathered?”

Graziella stood before them with the rest of the plaza behind her. Her voice somehow seemed a little languid as her thinly slit

eyes moved from one person to the next. She then began by speaking to Elliot.

"If I remember correctly, I have not seen the likes of you since the report that you were going to take part in the investigation. Isn't that right, bastard hero?"

"I'm glad to see you in good spirits, Your Imperial Highness. I am honored to be called forth by you despite your oh so busy schedule."

Elliot responded to the princess's polite-yet-disrespectful tone in kind. His narrowed gaze really seemed to be saying, "How dare you drag us here?" And the princess seemed to hear him loud and clear.

"I see you haven't changed, bastard hero."

As the two finished their greetings, Christa began speaking in a deliberate tone.

"Your Imperial Highness, why have you called forth the summoned hero without making any sort of prior arrangements with him?"

It did seem like a rather rude way to treat a hero. But if it weren't obvious enough from the way that she called him "bastard hero," Graziella didn't care.

"Restrain yourself. Does a mere magic priest dare push her opinion on me?"

Graziella was glaring at Christa intensely, but Christa stared right back undauntedly. As if to mediate between the two, Elliot put his hand on Christa's shoulder. He seemed to be telling her she was out of her league, and she got the message. Christa excused herself before reluctantly withdrawing. Next, Graziella turned towards Suimei.

"So you're the damned fool who is quarreling with the hero for some reason?"

"Yes."

Suimei bowed his head down. The princess confirmed his identity, but seemed much more interested in the person beside him.

"I never would have imagined you would have White Flame-dono by your side."

"It is good to see you well, princess."

Felmenia spoke respectfully and bowed to Graziella. Christa whipped around and looked at Felmenia with surprise. She probably knew of Astel's White Flame, and thus realized Felmenia

had given them a fake name. This realization, unsurprisingly, came with a scowl. However, none of that really mattered to Felmenia. She simply ignored Christa and focused on Graziella.

"Why have you, a mage from Astel, come to the Empire?"

"I believe my application to stay here was already accepted, Your Highness."

"I'm asking why you're in the Empire in the first place."

It seemed Felmenia had already prepared an answer to the irritated question now directed at her. Something of a resigned sigh escaped her lips.

"In accordance with the guidance of the Goddess Alshuna, I have come to serve as Suimei-dono's aide."

"Oh? Did you not previously say you were working under King Almadious's direct orders? Are you saying that was a lie?"

"After reporting this to His Majesty, he ordered me to abide the will of the Goddess."

"Hmph... So you say. This is the man you're aiding?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"I see. Well, your story is reasonable enough... The Goddess does pass down some seemingly senseless oracles. If I remember correctly, the current issue at hand also involves the Goddess."

Graziella seemed convinced enough. She was still pointing a suspicious look at Felmenia, but she was willing to drop the subject there.

"Let us get straight to the point. The reason I called you bastards here today is to inform you that I have taken charge of the investigation into the coma incidents that you've been having your match over."

"Hmph..."

"That's..."

Suimei had guessed it would be related to the coma incidents, but he hadn't predicted this. He and Felmenia both wore stern expressions, but Elliot and Christa seemed unperturbed by this news. Elliot glanced up at the princess and presented her with a question.

"Your Highness, if that was all you had to say, there was no real need to call us all the way here, correct? Would it not have been enough to simply send a messenger?"

"No, that wouldn't do. For the sake of closing this case expeditiously, I will have you two bastards work under my direct

command."

"Wha—?!"

"Hey now..."

Elliot was expecting her to just commandeer the investigation, and was at a loss for words over this development. He stared at her blankly. Bewilderment could also be seen on Suimei's face and heard in his voice. Completely insensitive to their surprise, Graziella firmly demanded their consent.

"Do you have any objections?"

"Of course I do."

"Oh? And what might that be? I've even taken into consideration your damned quarrel, you know?"

Elliot spoke up immediately, but Graziella made it quite clear that challenging her would be futile. It seemed that resistance only riled her up more. Her mention of "taking their quarrel into consideration" also likely meant that if they continued with their investigations, then the church would not have any complaints. Elliot was the one who'd objected originally, but Christa replied in his stead.

"Your Highness, Elliot-sama and that man are investigating the incident in accordance with Alshuna-sama's will. To put both Elliot-sama and that man under your command would mean getting in the way of the match."

"And just how is that my problem? I don't have any reason to look after your damned match."

"But it would be an obstruction of the will of the Goddess, and I can't imagine that it's considered proper for a royal to make light of that."

"Proper? You want to talk about propriety? Before this is your damned problem, this is the Empire's problem. It may be wrong to make light of Alshuna's will, but after all is said and done, that is but a trifle compared to the well-being of the citizens of the imperial capital. We do not know when or where another victim will turn up. Under these circumstance, should our top priority not be bringing a quick resolution to the entire situation?"

When Graziella claimed her actions were for the safety of her people, not even Christa could offer any objection. All she could do now was unhappily keep her mouth tightly shut.

"Is nobody going to say anything after she talked to a princess like that?" Suimei asked Felmenia quietly.

“The hero is a direct agent of the Goddess. In other words, a saint. In this case, it is actually Princess Graziella who would be considered out of line. After all, Christa-dono is under the hero’s protection... Besides, look closely. You can see it written on the faces of all the mortified soldiers and military policemen around.”

Following Felmenia’s suggestion, Suimei let his gaze wander around. Just as she said, not only the military police and soldiers, but even Graziella’s attendant had gone pale. Graziella then turned her attention over to Suimei.

“And what about you?”

Naturally, Suimei refused as well.

“I will also have to take the privilege of declining. I am sure a quick resolution is the highest priority, but I also do not have any intention of being forced to cooperate with you people.”

“This is an official draft. You are currently living in the imperial capital, correct? As long as you live within the Empire, it is a matter of course that you will cooperate with us.”

“Are you implying that if I don’t, you’ll throw me into prison?”

“Hmph. That *is* certainly a threat we can use. However, in this case, it is a little too oppressive.”

After a brief pause, Graziella put her hand to her chin as if she’d just thought of a brilliant idea.

“I know. If you bastards are that intent on objecting, then how about we impose a condition on your draft?”

“And what would that be?”

“I said that I would have you bastards under my command, but I was thinking I should first verify your abilities. How about it? If you have a match with me and win, then it would be fine to allow you two bastards to freely act on your own.”

“Ugh...”

“How arrogant...”

Elliot and Christa both groaned as Graziella’s overly-aggressive attitude gave way to her offering up another completely unreasonable solution. Graziella was the strongest mage in the Empire. The only reason she was suggesting this “condition” was surely because she had extreme confidence in her abilities. Elliot, however, was perhaps unaware of this. A sparkle of curiosity glimmered in his eye.

“You will fight yourself, Your Highness?”

“Is that strange?”

“No, not strange, but...”

What he was hesitating to say was that a task like this would normally be left to one of her subordinates. But it seemed that was not at all what she had in mind. As Suimei turned to look at them, Elliot and Christa were whispering to each other. She was likely giving him information on Graziella. After a few moments, Elliot—who seemed to discover that this was not a trifling matter—grew tense. Seeing this, Graziella flashed a fearless smile.

“That’s right. Let’s test your power first, bastard hero... Hmph, shall we have a look?”

“You are quite confident in yourself, I see.”

“Confidence? When you are able to properly grasp the limits of your own abilities, confidence comes quite naturally, wouldn’t you say?”

Graziella completely cut down Elliot’s accusation that her confidence was an overestimation of her abilities. And with that, Elliot lowered his stance and let his fighting spirit surge from his body.

“Elliot-sama, y-you couldn’t possibly be accepting her conditions, could you?!”

“Yeah. It should be amusing to indulge the princess in her selfishness, right? Besides, if we don’t accept, they won’t let us leave anytime soon.”

“Elliot-sama...”

“Now then, Christa, fall back.”

With a slightly concerned expression, Elliot urged Christa to take refuge outside the immediate area. Suimei and the others also found a safe place where they could observe without getting dragged into things.

“Do not bore me, bastard hero.”

With that bold statement, Graziella received a gauntlet from her attendant and slipped her hand into it. The gauntlet’s silver sheen complemented her white coat, and there was an inlay or material along the knuckles that gave off a black luster. Even Suimei, who was well informed in the way of magickally treated materials, couldn’t identify it. It didn’t seem to be metal.

“Menia, what is that black stuff on that gauntlet?”

“It’s darkwood. It originates from trees in the north. It’s hard like steel, but compared to metal, it’s far lighter. It’s also naturally strong against mana, so it’s often used in protective equipment and

sometimes even weapons for mages."

"I see..."

Suimei was quite interested in this unknown material, but not as interested as he was in the fight between Graziella and Elliot. As the attendants and escorts cleared out of the area, Graziella leaped down from the top of the staircase. She knocked her fists together as if to check the fit of her gauntlet. It sent a deep, heavy clang throughout the plaza. While still looking up at Graziella, Elliot drew his shining orichalcos sword from its sheath. The blade, excited with mana, was glowing as he thrust the tip into the bricks underfoot.

"Call Arming."

His clear voice rang out in the air like a bell, activating his first spell. A rich amount of mana coiled around Elliot's body. Within moments, his body was shielded by dull silver armor. As an eye-catching great helm came into shape, his entire body was encased in protective metal. In stark contrast to Elliot's usually dainty appearance, it was profoundly boorish equipment. Though it looked like it would restrict his mobility, his armor was actually woven together with mana from a spell. Its weight wasn't necessarily what it looked like.

This was a mystery from Elliot's world. It materialized a physical substance, but the characteristics of the spell were unfamiliar to Suimei. He knew of spells that could produce a similar effect, but this was a system of magicka that did not exist in his world. As his coat of arms burned into the armor, Elliot finally materialized a shield. It was a kite shield that also bore his coat of arms. Observing Elliot's use of magicka, Graziella turned an admiring expression on him.

"Oh? Is this magic from the hero's world? It's an amusing technique."

"I am honored. But it will do much more than just amuse you."

Elliot's muffled voice emerged from inside his helmet. Then, with an air of confidence, he lowered his stance. Seeing that he was now ready for battle, Graziella made her move.

"We'll start with a preliminary test, shall we? Oh Earth. Harden thy body and become stone to smash my enemy. Stone Raid."

It was a spell that Felmenia had used before, magic that used the earth attribute to shoot out stones. However, Graziella's title as the strongest master of earth magic was not just for show.

Felmenia's handiwork couldn't compare to the sheer quantity and size of the stones created by Graziella in the blink of an eye. She was suddenly surrounded by countless stones, all tapered to sharp points. And as she fired them off, Elliot held out his shield and took a defensive stance.

Though the stones rushed in, every one of them was repelled by Elliot's shield, leaving him completely unharmed. Judging that the hail had ended, Elliot began invoking his own magicka. After letting out a chant-like mutter, his sword was now clad in lightning and shot out an electric bolt from its tip. Having sensed the movement of mana, Graziella evaded the bolt safely.

"I see. You're quite capable."

"There's still more to come! I present my wish in celebration before the extolled spirit of wisdom. Answer my call, Force Grant!"

When Elliot activated his keywords, nothing physically seemed to happen. The mana that was unleashed in the air, however, was to enhance his physical abilities. It wrapped around his whole body.

"That magicka..."

Felmenia's eyes were wide open in surprise as she observed Elliot's casting. This was likely because she'd realized that he was using multiple magickas concurrently. It was superior to the magic theory of this world that was limited to two spells at most. And under the continuous effect of these magickas, Elliot's combat ability soared. It was a popular style of magicka for fighting, but it was practically unheard of in this world.

Graziella closed in on Elliot. It was a rare sight for mages of this world to advance like that, and seemed to suggest that her specialty was in close-range combat. Without showing any fear of Elliot's heavy equipment, Graziella moved in and thrust her fist at him. Naturally, she was using physical reinforcement magic as well. It seemed in no way inferior to Elliot's. And while attacking with her fists, she was also using earth magic. In response, Elliot used his shield and lightning-clad sword to boldly fight her off.

"His way of fighting is splendid, don't you think?"

"It certainly seems hero-like."

"Do you find fault with it, Suimei-dono?"

"Well, it conforms to the basics pretty well. I think it's a good way of fighting."

Suimei agreed with Felmenia's assessment. After watching Elliot fight, Suimei could no longer say that his confidence was all

bravado. His sword skills were obvious, and the armor he'd conjured was quite durable. The invoking time on his physical reinforcement magicka and weapon enchantment magicka was nice and concise, and its power was considerable. But it was all somewhat dull in that it was quite expected.

"The shield and armor are different defensive spells. On top of that, there's the physical reinforcement spell and the attack magicka he's using. It's the perfect combination, is it not?"

"It's praiseworthy, sure. He has both close quarters combat and ranged magicka battles covered. Furthermore, it's reliable. However..."

Considering the amount of mana used, the speed of spells, and their effects, Graziella was superior in all aspects. Elliot only had his lightning magicka, but Graziella was invoking new earth magic left and right while engaging in hand-to-hand combat.

"I had it in my head that the mages of this world didn't use hand-to-hand fighting techniques."

"Her Imperial Highness Graziella is a special case. People who have talent as mages and are still able to engage in hand-to-hand combat like this are very rare indeed."

As Suimei and Felmenia were having this conversation, it seemed that the fighting had reached a stalemate. Graziella and Elliot put some distance between each other and were staring each other down. Graziella then began speaking.

"That's it. I've seen enough."

"...Of what?"

"That damned armor and shield. They both consist of physical substances, but the shield is used to defend against magic while the armor is used to defend against all other attacks, no?"

Graziella wore a self-satisfied grin, but Elliot remained dead silent. Just what kind of face was he making underneath that helmet?

"Suimei-dono, was that right?"

"Yeah. It's just as that woman said. There's no mistake about it."

While Suimei and Felmenia were talking, Christa let out a scream.

"Elliot-sama!"

Elliot's shield was sent flying by Graziella's powerful fist. She then stepped between him and the shield to prevent him from

picking it back up. Elliot had no choice but to step back, away from her and his shield.

"Suimei-dono, the hero's shield isn't vanishing..."

"The spell must be made so that it won't vanish until he dispels it. If it were something that required him to constantly pour mana into it, there would be the possibility of him being stripped of protection anytime he let it slip, after all."

"I see. That's certainly true."

Felmenia seemed thoroughly convinced by Suimei's explanation, but she had more questions for him.

"Suimei-dono, between Princess Graziella and the hero, who do you think will win?"

"I can't say for certain. But the princess has the advantage. As long as they're even in close combat, she has the upper hand with magicka. If he doesn't have something to turn the tables, then that'll be the end of him."

"Something to turn the tables..."

"He's still got mana stored up. Is he not planning on using it, or can he not use it here...?"

Suimei believed that Elliot was still holding something back. His fighting style still left power in reserve, after all. And he was up against Graziella, whose overwhelming combat abilities were a considerable force to be reckoned with. Watching them fight, Suimei couldn't help but wonder why this world needed to summon heroes if it had people who were as strong as she was.

In the middle of their exchange, the lightning snaking around Elliot's sword vanished. It seemed that the effective time of the spell had expired. Just as Elliot was about to invoke the lightning once more...

"Oh Earth! Thou art the crystallization of my tyranny! Take hold of unyielding power and smash my foes to pieces! Become a monument that shall extol glorious death! Crystal Raid!"

Graziella called forth her endgame move. It was a grand spell. As the crystals that pierced up through the bricks on the ground surrounded Graziella, she flung her arm to the side. The crystals rushed forward. Elliot, who was now without a shield, didn't have time to defend with magicka. Christa's screams rang out.

"Suimei-dono!"

"So it's settled, huh..."

A cloud of dust filled the air. It obscured everyone's vision, but

it was still plain to see who'd won.

★

The cloud of dust was eventually blown away by the wind. As it cleared the area, it revealed Elliot on his knees and gasping for breath. And then there was Graziella, who was looking down on him with an expression that conveyed even more zeal and curiosity than before. She had been the victor, just as Suimei expected. Graziella then swept her hair back and folded her arms.

"...S-So that would about sum it up. Your fighting techniques are quality, but when it comes to spirit, Astel's hero seems better."

With a triumphant look on her face, she was comparing her encounter with Elliot to the time she'd fought alongside Reiji in Astel. Seeing her tower over him with her arms folded like that, Elliot must have felt humiliated. He was still wearing his armor, but the shaking of his fists was quite visible. After gulping down a drink brought to her by her attendant, Graziella turned back towards Elliot.

"A deal's a deal. Until the incident is resolved, I will have you obey my commands."

"Ugh..."

"Or what? After all this, will the hero of all people refuse?"

"...No."

Graziella's way of speaking was quite provocative, but Elliot accepted her words. His face indicated it brought him no pleasure to do so, however. He looked disgusted. He then dispelled his armor and shield, and stood back up. Christa rushed over to his side and was about to try and dissuade him, but it seemed that once Elliot decided on something, there was no going back. He simply shook his head at Christa. Graziella then turned to Suimei. She narrowed her eyes into thin slits as she stared at him.

"Now then, you're next."

Suimei wouldn't kowtow in a situation like this. He met her gaze head on.

"I'd like to refuse getting involved in any fighting, however."

"You have no say in the matter, bastard. You will either submit to me, or fight me."

Suimei's request was flatly denied by her haughty words. Felmenia then shouted at Graziella.

“Your Highness, please wait! No matter how you put it, is this not too high-handed?!”

“And who, exactly, would you complain to about that?”

“Th-That...!”

“What? There’s no need to worry, I assure you. We’ll just have a little go at each other.”

Graziella’s penchant for getting her way by dominating everything was amazing in its own right. It was entirely possible for Felmenia to lodge a complaint with Almadious, but the princess didn’t seem to care one bit. As she and Suimei stared each other down, he stepped forward.

“Menia, get back.”

“Suimei-dono, you’re...!”

“She won’t listen no matter what we say. The hunger in her eyes says that much.”

Suimei nodded in Graziella’s direction, suggesting Felmenia take a look for herself. Following his lead, she turned to the princess.

“In her eyes...? A hunger...?”

Felmenia sounded puzzled. It seemed she couldn’t understand it; however, reflected within those blue eyes was certainly a hunger. They were the eyes of someone who pursued conflict. Or rather, of someone who desired the thrill of a good fight. Suimei recognized that, yet he approached her anyway. Graziella put on an arrogant smile like she was tired of waiting.

“It seems you’ve finally gotten motivated.”

“Against my will, mind you.”

Graziella’s excitement was brushed off by Suimei’s exasperation. Elliot, who had stepped back together with Christa, was looking at Suimei rather dubiously.

“Hey, aren’t you still...”

He was asking about Suimei’s unhealed injuries. And in answer to that incomplete question, Suimei confirmed the truth in a bitter voice.

“There was your case and then this one... My goodness, I’ve had nothing but bad luck since coming here.”

While making light of the situation, Suimei got into position. Graziella was already prepared for battle and was letting her ferocious presence run wild. Observing Suimei, she turned a critical eye on him.

“It’s dull.”

“What is?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Your face.”

It was a transparent taunt. And when Suimei’s expression stiffened, Graziella let out a thrilled chuckle.

“Ohoho, don’t be so offended. You’re no gem, but I’ve judged that a bastard like you is not one to be underestimated... According to the stories, you may just be on par with the Elite Twelve.”

She laughed, but then her tone turned sharp and she gave Suimei a piercing stare. It seemed she was indeed taking him seriously. Liliana was one of the Elite Twelve, so if Graziella assumed that she was the culprit that Suimei had fought during the incident, she had every reason to be on her guard with him.

“I’m a little late in asking, but you were the one who drove the culprit into a corner, correct?”

“Who knows? I don’t know who told you such a thing, but I have no memory of doing it.”

“I’m talking about Liliana Zandyke.”

“She was certainly present at the time, but there’s no proof of whether or not she’s the culprit.”

“No proof, you say? You bastard, were you not at the scene? Did you not fight with her for that reason?”

Graziella came down hard on Suimei’s vague, nonchalant replies and intensely questioned him. It felt like the air itself had become heavy. But Suimei paid none of this any mind.

“I wonder... My memories of that night are awfully vague.”

“Do you intend to play dumb to the end?”

“...Hmph.”

“Oh...?”

“Isn’t it about time you shut the fuck up, you stupid brat?”

Suimei had had enough of her little interrogation. He blew her pretentiously considerate attitude right out of the water. He could hear the angry voices of people around him, but it was nothing that concerned him. While he was holding on to Liliana’s secret, such inquiries were a hindrance and an annoyance. But since she was trying to get information out of him, it meant that they still hadn’t grasped Liliana’s whereabouts. The reason they were to strong-arm Suimei under their command was basically because they had gotten impatient. But upon hearing Suimei’s rudeness, Graziella let out an oppressive laugh.

“Hmph, so that is your true character? That kind of disrespectful speech can get you charged with slander against the crown, you know?”

“Like I care! If you think you can arrest me, just give it a try!”

“Ha! You sure can talk!”

Graziella’s very words were filled with energy as she rushed fiercely at Suimei. Unlike her fight with Elliot, she intended to start things off in close quarters. Suimei evaded her fist and blocked her high kick with his arm. Twisting on the spot, he aimed a roundhouse kick at Graziella’s head. As she raised her gauntlet and blocked it, Suimei jumped backwards. Graziella immediately gave chase with her fist.

“Ugh!”

“What’s wrong? Your movements are dull.”

Suimei was annoyed, but just as she said, his body was not moving fluidly. Due to the damage to his astral body, even though his physical body was unharmed, it still didn’t quite move the way he wanted it to. It took everything he had to simply dodge blows in close combat.

“Your evasive maneuvers are respectable. However...”

Graziella fell back. The reason was obvious.

“Oh Earth! Thou art a stone bullet shining with evil’s brilliance! Strike down my enemy in the blink of an eye! Stone Iridescence!”

As her words came to an end, an amorphous mineral like an opal appeared in the air. From the sunlight and mana shining down on it, the light refracting through it shined like a rainbow and assaulted Suimei’s eyes. The constantly changing wavelength of light was strong; if one were weak to the stimulus, then it would likely induce spasms due to seizure. The mass of minerals served well as a smokescreen and could deceive a simple opponent from the impending attack; however, Suimei was a magician. Partially closing his eyes while enduring the dazzling light, Suimei deployed his defensive magicka.

“Secundum moenia, expansio localis!”

[Second rampart, local expansion!]

The mass of minerals that came flying at Suimei was completely blocked by his golden magicka circle. Unsurprisingly, Graziella’s eyes shot wide open like she’d witnessed something strange. However, her expression quickly returned to its usual smug state.

“...It didn’t work, huh?”

Her spell had been completely shut down, but Graziella was still quite composed. It was like she was saying that she still had much more up her sleeve, both in terms of mana and spells. That was probably entirely correct. She was standing there without a single drop of sweat on her face, or any other sign of exhaustion. She had the capacity to fire off such two verse chants a multitude of times without any problem. She was known as the strongest mage in the Empire for a reason.

The earth attribute of all things...

Suimei grimaced at the bitter taste in his mouth. He had learned her specialty earlier while observing her fight with Elliot, yet he still couldn't stop himself from groaning over it. Out of the four or five traditional elements, magicka of the earth variety obviously held the most mass and hardness. It mostly used sand, earth, rocks, and minerals to defend or attack with serious impact.

Suimei's second rampart was a spell that defended against mana and the spells it wove. If an earth spell was just attacking him with rocks and such, then the physical defenses of the first rampart could block it. But even simple magicka of the earth attribute created a large shock on impact. The damage to the surroundings was not insignificant, and it was especially painful for Suimei, who couldn't move around too much in this condition. He felt perfectly entitled to gripe about it. But if there was something he could do, it was to simply keep up appearances with a composed face.

"Is this alright? If you keep firing off such flashy magic, the damage to the district will be pretty serious, you know?"

"Like I care. The only ones living in this area are the rich. A little property damage won't empty their purses. So you shouldn't hold back either. Understood?"

"...It sounds like you just gave me permission to break stuff."

"Honestly, clearing some space in the imperial capital would be quite refreshing."

Pretty much giving him a carte blanche to destroy an upper class residential area wasn't something someone of her status should be doing. But just based off of her expression, Suimei couldn't get a read on what she was thinking. He couldn't yet determine just what emotion hid behind those words. However, he could at least tell that this was not an opponent he'd be able to shake up with words. Graziella rushed in once more. However, in complete contrast to her last charge, her footwork was light.

“Sh-She’s fast!” yelled Felmenia.

It seemed she was just as surprised by Graziella’s swift movements. The mage before Suimei’s eyes was moving left and right with feints to try and throw Suimei off. But the speed with which she was doing it was unnatural.

“Earth magic, huh?”

“That’s right. But just seeing through that much won’t earn you my praise.”

While messing with Suimei’s sense of depth, she was probably planning to leap in just a step away from him. But Suimei wasn’t about to let her insult his magician’s eyes like that. After getting a rough grasp of Graziella’s location, Suimei snapped his fingers.

“Ugh—?!”

The air in front of her burst while she was in the middle of her footwork. She was unable to maintain her balance, and stumbled a step forward. The effect of Suimei’s strike magicka didn’t end at just stopping her in her tracks, however. Perhaps due to the shock to her head and body, Graziella was staggered. Seeing his opportunity, Suimei switched to an offensive in the blink of an eye. He repeatedly snapped his fingers at Graziella and unleashed a constant stream of his strike magicka. At the mercy of a storm of explosions from every direction, Graziella had no time to prepare any sort of protective magic. She was forced to shield herself with her arms in a defensive stance.

“Tch, you bastard! Magic without any chanting...!”

However, with just this strike magicka, Suimei was unable to put a decisive end to this battle. He was preparing to invoke his next spell, but because of the limitations his body placed on his mana use during his recovery, it was slow.

Shit...

While Suimei was cursing internally, Graziella started muttering something. Assuming it was going to be another earth spell, Suimei paid careful attention to any changes in his surroundings. Sensing tremors beneath him was all the omen he needed, and Suimei immediately moved to evade. As Graziella struck the ground beneath her, it shattered to pieces and turned into a countless number of pebbles that all sailed towards Suimei. It was like a monsoon of bullets from all directions, but Suimei still managed to stave off the attack.

“In that case, how about this?!”

As Graziella yelled, she turned over her military coat.

“Heed my desires. Fly in from the beyond. To the one who won’t hold an audience with me, my hail detaches you from the world’s entangled and inseparable laws. Become a power that surpasses all reason. Open, Devil Connect!”

“Do you think using the same kind of magic over and over will —Wha?!”

The end of Suimei’s taunt was cut off by his own surprised voice. Thanks to his intuition, he had a decent grasp on the shape the spell Graziella was invoking would take. But something was different this time. There was no mediation on an Element in her magic. And the moment he realized that, a region of the air became hazy. Suddenly, a giant mass of rock appeared in that space, and Suimei brought forth his second rampart to intercept it. However, for some reason, his defensive magicka did little in the way of stopping it. Before the giant mass of rock, the rampart of the golden fortress was screaming. On top of that, magickal power had been building up above him. At this rate...

“Tch!”

“Suimei-dono!”

Suimei pulled away to dodge, but he was still struck by a portion of the massive rock. The shock alone sent him flying. The rock sailed onward and smashed into a corner of the plaza with a thunderous crash that kicked up dust everywhere. Suimei, however, was forced unwillingly into low-altitude flight. He immediately began manipulating phenomena to correct his posture. For a magician with sufficient power, without any sort of chant or action, they could manipulate phenomena to an extent with only an image in their mind. It was restricted to simple things, but when it came down to a race against time like this, it was a fairly useful skill.

The image Suimei had in his mind was one of a large hand pulling on his body. With that, as if his body had indeed been yanked by some invisible power, he unnaturally flew to the side and landed safely. After finishing this gravity-defying stunt, his whole body writhed in pain.

“Ugh...”

“So you dodged it. Well, you should at least be capable of that much.”

Graziella furrowed her brow as she beheld Suimei’s peculiar movements, though she didn’t seem particularly distracted by it.

Unlike most of the other mages Suimei had met, she was fairly accepting of unknown mysteries. Whereas Christa and Elliot, on the other hand, could only groan after witnessing the magic that Graziella had used.

"Ridiculous... That kind of enormous..."

"To use that kind of magic in this kind of place... Just what is she thinking?"

They expressed it differently, but they both felt the same way. They were equally astonished by the extreme magic they'd just witnessed. Graziella had created a boulder so large that it was practically all they could see, and sent it flying at her opponent. Suimei still had his golden fortress at the ready and was racking his brain over how to deal with the next attack.

Something was odd about Graziella's magic. The spell she'd just used defied everything Suimei knew about magic in this world. He'd been told that the single magic system here relied on hailing the Elements to unleash their power. So just what had she done? She hadn't meditated on the Elements, and it wasn't just a physical attack that launched rock. Yet his rampart defense against spells had hardly done anything. Suimei carefully thought back on what he had witnessed moments ago. The sense of discomfort, the hazy region of space... That enormous mass of rock took form far too quickly to have been natural. Suimei then suddenly noticed something within his line of sight.

"I see. That magic... it uses the embroidery in the lining of that coat, right?"

"Oh?"

As Suimei used his keen insight to identify Graziella's magic, her gaze sharpened.

"Interesting. Let's hear your theory."

Contrary to what she was saying, her face indicated she was not amused in the least. She looked like she was demanding an explanation and would scrutinize every word thoroughly.

"I don't like the way you're saying that, but... That magic, unlike typical magic, doesn't rely on the Elements. It's essentially a summoning technique, right?"

Elliot was the first to react to those words.

"Summoning technique? What are you saying? This world doesn't have summoning techniques, does it?"

"Doesn't it? There's the magic that called you here—that out-of-

place artifact ritual of the hero summoning magic."

"Ah..."

"That magic she used just now likely uses a single part of that spell to tie two places together. It's teleportation magicka."

"Tele-por-tashun magic-ah...?"

Felmenia, Graziella, and Christa didn't seem to understand the meaning of his words. There was one person, however, who grasped it just fine and nodded admiringly.

"I get it. It's a type of teleportation spell, huh? That enormous rock was stored in a different location, and then transferred here via her magic?"

"That's right. Otherwise, what just happened couldn't be adequately explained."

"What about the possibility that it was just an illusion?"

"Not possible. Of the magicka that uses earth as an attribute, other than spells that just move earth and rocks, the objects manifested play the role of the earth attribute in the spell. Since the majority of said objects are composed entirely of mystical power, a defensive wall against spells is capable of blocking them. But what she did just now was an entirely physical attack."

The projectiles that were fired out by magicka of the earth attribute were fundamentally vague existences. Whether they were a mish-mash of substances brought together by magicka or a construction of the actual spell itself, depending on the method used, the product was either completely physical or completely mystical in nature. In the case of mystical projectiles, magickal defenses to break down spells would be enough to defend against them. However, in the case of physical one, they would either have to be broken down with offensive magicka, decelerated and stopped, or repelled altogether. There were many approaches to defending against the physical variety, but treating it like a mystical object was not one of them.

And the magic Graziella had used fell into that category. The massive rock was placed onto a magic circle beforehand, and using a spell, she connected that magic circle to the space before her. Doing so teleported the rock to her, and she could then use it to attack her opponent. The means behind the attack were actually extremely simple, but it could not be criticized by saying it was lacking in sophistication or that it was a mere warp spell. She had easily transferred something weighing hundreds of tons without

compressing its size. The dangerous potential of such a spell was plain to see.

Suimei's rampart had the power to stop a tank shell with far more destructive power than her boulder. However, that was possible because he only had to stop something roughly the size of a bullet. For something that massive, even if its destructive power was inferior, it wasn't something he could stop completely. Of course, there were other approaches to handling the situation, so he wasn't too concerned, but...

"No, wait. If that is teleportation magic, then weren't the preparations to use it lacking?"

"That's why I said it was the embroidery in the lining. It has the same spell as the magicka circle inscribed in it. The compiled spell doesn't require much of a chant, and it's also probable that magicka circle where the rock was stored has some sort of setup to it as well."

"Even so, it doesn't all seem to add up..."

"That's just how strange summoning magicka is... But at the time of the teleportation, the lining has to be exposed."

"I see, so that's what gave you a hint..."

With that, Elliot turned to Graziella with an unpleasant expression on his face. He then groaned and spoke with a palpable bitterness.

"So when you were fighting me, you had yet to get serious..."

Graziella's expression remained completely transparent as she replied.

"It seems the two of you have quite a dynamic going when you talk, I see."

"That's news to me..."

Suimei looked at Elliot with a puzzled expression like he'd just realized it himself. Graziella then astonishedly acknowledged that Suimei had guessed the truth behind her magic.

"There were a bunch of nonsensical words mixed in your explanation, but it is certain that you have seen through it."

After Graziella let out a snort, she sharpened her gaze considerably and glared at Suimei.

"However, I'm surprised that there is someone who could grasp the technique created by gathering the best technology in all the Empire after only seeing it once. Bastard, just who are you?"

"That isn't something that you need to know."

“Hmph, that’s fine. I thought it was strange that White Flame-dono was with you, but that must mean you have something or other to do with the man who defeated that Demon General Rajas and his army, right?”

“What’s that? Wasn’t the one who defeated the demon general the hero from Astel?”

“Quit it. You’ve probably heard the truth from White Flame-dono already. Besides, that man is still far too green—”

Graziella’s mana began expanding before she cut herself off. This likely meant she was going to go full throttle from here. She mostly used common magics of the Elements, but she also had that skill which allowed her to accelerate her body as well as the teleportation magic she could form in the air.

“Using a fighting style like a damn Taoist…”

“Again, I don’t understand what you’re saying, but it seems you have more of a backbone than that hero. Though it is a little late, I will hear your name.”

“It’s Suimei Yakagi.”

“Oh? What an unusual name.”

“Yeah, sue me.”

Stifling his impatience, Suimei stuck out his tongue like a petulant brat. This was a tough battle. If he were in better shape, there would be an untold number of ways he could respond. But with his astral body still damaged, even a two verse chant was a strain on him. Even the simple trick of relying on magicka to transform into gas would be fairly dangerous due to the ambiguous state of Suimei’s mind.

But all else aside, Suimei knew that teleportation magic she was using couldn’t be invoked more than three times in a short span of time. Regardless of the practitioner’s abilities, the laws of magicka would not allow it. But even armed with that knowledge, the current Suimei couldn’t—

Once more, a region of space in the air became hazy. Another massive rock was about to fall down. Suimei evaded to the side, but was unable to get away cleanly.

“Gah!”

“S-Suimei-dono!”

While the shock wave was still rattling his brain, Graziella began her next move. Suimei didn’t even have time to correct his posture.

“There’s still more!”

Graziella shattered the massive rock with a fist and shot the stone shrapnel at Suimei. It was a barrage of sharp rocks. But she wasn’t done there. The next thing Suimei knew, the ground was rising and his body was completely racked with pain. Witnessing all this unfold, Felmenia’s face went deathly pale.

“A-Aah...”

Unable to bear it anymore, she screamed at Graziella.

“Your Highness! Please stop this already!”

But Graziella had no intention of listening. Intent on bringing things to an end, she struck the ground with her spell. The ground rose further and transformed into a spire and thrust at Suimei. The earthen blast blanketed the area in a curtain of dust. Graziella took a single glance at her handiwork and had but one thing to say.

“It’s over.”

But it was a premature declaration. As the curtain of dust drew back, she could see Suimei standing there breathing heavily. Felmenia looked relieved and delighted.

“Tch, don’t just arbitrarily... call the match on your own, damn it...”

“You still haven’t fallen over, huh? No matter. You won’t be able to fight any more in that condition. Give up and cooperate with me.”

Perhaps because she was exasperated by his stubbornness, Suimei bothered to listen to her. But what he heard was not a taunt. No, what she said was a plainspoken request without any of her usual abusive language.

“Give up? Me? Ha... haha...”

Suimei’s eerie, sardonic laughter between his ragged breaths resounded throughout the plaza. Graziella’s gaze grew sharp as she looked at Suimei, who ignorantly seemed to be provoking her.

“What’s so funny?”

“I won’t be able to fight; that’s what you said, right? Just who do you think I am?”

“I don’t know how you can be that confident. Is it not obvious that—”

It happened as Graziella was in the middle of speaking. Before she could even finish putting her thoughts into words, the air began to tremble.

“Is this earth attribute magic? No...”

Graziella hazarded a guess, but it was incorrect. The real answer was magicka. It was a phenomenon caused by magicka, and not just any regular phenomenon. And the trembling gradually strengthened with Suimei's power. The abnormal oscillation was caused by nothing other than the enormous amount of mana that was taking shape, causing space itself to shake with its mystical power.

Within the shaking space that showed no signs of calming down, Suimei's mana was swelling up in proportion to the strength of the vibrations. The effect was akin to a nuclear reactor's enormous energy overflowing, but it had appeared in an instant and had already caused a vortex covering five hundred meters in all directions. Pulled by the manifested power, the bricks on the ground were lifted in the air and shattered. Many small, blue lightning bolts danced in the air like an electric current. Their crackling echoed ominously.

Suimei steeled himself. If he kept fighting while heeding the limits of his body, only a dead end lay before him. He was smack in the middle of the plaza right now. There was nowhere to run. And if there was no way of winning by using all of his strength, there was no other choice but to strike with his entire soul.

Archiatius Overload.

Those words that Suimei had ready in the back of his throat never left his mouth. He'd finished all preparations for unleashing them and was standing at the border where his mana furnace would be released. What stopped Suimei, who had a crimson fire burning in his eyes, was Felmenia, who jumped at his back with all her might.

"Suimei-dono!"

As Felmenia clung to his torso, Suimei turned his head slightly to look over his shoulder at her.

"Menia?! What are—"

"You cannot, Suimei-dono! Please restrain yourself! You cannot let out this kind of power in the middle of the city!"

"But..."

"Suimei-dono! Please calm down! Just unleashing your mana is one thing, but if you use magicka like this, not a single building... No, not a single human would...!"

"Tch..."

It was true everything and everyone in a certain radius

wouldn't be getting off lightly. Felmenia was clinging desperately to him through the raging wind created by his mana to try and prevent exactly that. Suimei abandoned his plans to ignite his mana furnace when she begged him. It was just as she said. In this situation where he didn't have the leisure of holding back to defeat Graziella, he naturally resorted to using his magicka at full strength. But if he went all out, the damage wouldn't be limited to only the plaza. While grinding his teeth at the pain in his body and his frustration, Suimei decelerated the rotation of his mana furnace. When it turned off, a great lethargy assaulted Suimei's body. Unable to put up a fight against his strength draining from him, Suimei collapsed into Felmenia's arms.

"Ugh... Menia..."

"Come! It must be painful, but please hold on to me tightly!"

Judging that Suimei's condition was quite bad, Felmenia attempted to carry him away. She'd reinforced her physical strength before jumping at Suimei, and now went to apply the instant movement magicka she'd learned from Suimei. As she did, a wrathful voice chased after her.

"Did you think I'd just let you run?"

"Even if it is impossible, I will force my way through!"

With that, Felmenia began weaving her spell.

"Just as the eternal wind conveys, send the shining and swaying flames to His side! Hear my voice! Thou art the Ishim dyed in white! Hear my voice! Thou art the Ishim that shakes off all calamity!"

Light was running wild in the air. It traced the shape of a circle and began drawing letters and symbols within it. A magicka circle had taken form. The completed circle poured out an intense heat that one could scarcely imagine from seeing her previous magic.

"Ugh!"

When Graziella saw this, she fell back in a panic. Just as her feet touched the ground after leaping backward, Felmenia unleashed her keywords.

"Truth Flare!"

[White Flame Hyacinth!]

Like a blooming flower, the whistling white flames stretched out into thick belts and charged at Graziella as if to mow her down. In response, Graziella raised the ground before her like a shield and took a defensive stance. Eventually the white flame had died down

to the point where they could only burn hair, but they'd already accomplished their purpose. Felmenia and Suimei were both outside the plaza now and had escaped the effective range of Graziella's magic. From afar, Suimei could hear the sound of Graziella clicking her tongue. He then put his gratitude for Felmenia into words.

"...Sorry."

"Please do not worry about it. Suimei-dono, you were driven into a corner because of your injuries."

"I'm supposed to be used to feeling completely worn down though... How lame."

He had carelessly unleashed his power, and was now unwillingly retreating in defeat. He could only thank Felmenia again.

"...You saved me. Thank you."

And with that, Suimei's consciousness faded.

★

As Felmenia's White Flame Hyacinth vanished, Graziella stood in the middle of the scorched bricks and burning smell lingering in the air. Thoroughly unamused, she closed her eyes and suppressed her overflowing mana. She then watched Suimei and Felmenia flee without moving a muscle. As she did, her attendant walked up beside her and gave a respectful bow.

"Shall we pursue them?"

"It's fine. I don't care if we just leave them be."

"Are you certain? With the way that man was speaking earlier, we could have him taken in on charges of slander against the crown."

"That is certainly the case, but he's wounded. Besides, that man is accompanied by White Flame-dono. If we push them too strongly, it may result in needless friction with Astel."

"Still, Your Highness..."

"If you lot will go and capture them on your own, I would not be against giving you permission. But that's not exactly something you can do, now is it?"

As Graziella spoke with her attendant, she turned over her coat. She took a brief glance at her attendant's face, knowing full well the task she'd set before them was impossible. The opponent in question was a formidable foe that Graziella had been forced to use

her trump card against. Even if they prepared multiple people comparable to the Elite Twelve, it would still be an incredible feat. Even if her attendant, whose abilities were not lacking compared to Graziella's, personally said that they would definitely capture those two, it would be mere bravado.

"Besides, if we go too far, my elder brother will just get angry at us too."

Letting out an exasperated sigh, Graziella then turned to Elliot and Christa.

"Well then, I'll have you bastards come with me."

"...Understood."

"Hmph, you're unexpectedly discerning, aren't you?"

"Shall I add on that I am also extremely reluctant?"

"No, that was impudent of me, wasn't it?"

As she spat those words, Graziella returned to the pavilion with Elliot and Christa in tow. Christa looked unhappy from start to finish, but since she was serving Elliot, she had no choice but to follow along with him. Graziella suddenly came to a stop as they were walking.

"I am somewhat dissatisfied, but it's fine to call it a day with this, isn't it?"

She spoke bluntly, and her tone corroborated her dissatisfaction. Graziella shifted her attention to the partially destroyed plaza. There were structures and landscaping details that had been damaged by her magic as well as Felmenia's flame. But the most devastation came from Suimei's mana. Under the forceful wave of it, objects all over the plaza had crumbled. She could still feel the tingle of that enormous power on her skin as its remnants strongly lingered in the air.

Graziella realized that this was only the beginning. So even with clenched fists and beads of sweat running down her face, she let out a disappointed sigh.

Chapter 2: The Happy Dream Was Certainly in This Place

She could hear a voice. A young voice.

“Vanish, vanish...”

The voice was screaming in rejection. It carried despair directed at all the world and everything in it.

Lured by the echoing sorrow, she opened her eyes and looked forward. There she saw vague figures, as if obscured by a heat haze.

“Burn. Get beaten.”

A small figure tormenting her with words was among the others. That small figure had recognizable features. That young face was always cold. To hide the fear they held deep in their heart, they put on a brave front. But that same face was now shedding tears. Their eyes stricken by grief and anguish were overflowing.

Was she being assaulted? Was she doing the assaulting...? No, she was the one being assaulted. Abused like an insect. Scorned and stepped on, just like that, until she was reduced to a miserable figure herself. If this girl was meant to be granted revenge, to what end would it be? Would it not be the impossible, to redeem fiends who spread atrocities? However, both the screaming voice and the inquisitive voice, held back like a dam, would not come out of her own mouth.

Like that, while just watching the shadows, the small figure’s wailing ended. Before long, the girl began to tremble, and then the figure became completely black. Along with black bubbles rising to the surface, it expanded. Was the one who couldn’t be accepted... finally accepted? As it swelled in size until its original form was but a mere shadow of its current self, it began to swallow everything in its surroundings. The mana scattered in the area, the figure that was tormenting the girl, even the buildings—they all became a black mass and endlessly swelled up. It was headed to destroy the people of the city.

What she heard then was the voice of sorrow.

“Why? Why?” she asked repeatedly with anger as she despaired at the reply that never came. “Wait, why is it just me? Why did I end up with this appearance?”

She questioned the heavens where the highest existence should have been. She only desired an answer, in spite of no longer being able to return to her original form. She only desired to fill the void deep within her chest.

A crying voice remained in her ears. That voice from her heart, which so longed to be saved, turned inside-out and became a voice of resentment. Why would no one save her? Why did the despair brought on by the isolation of not having a single person to depend on have to exist in this world?

Even if it was just, the crying voice still lingered.

That’s why... it couldn’t be forgiven.

Even if it was just, it was true that there were those who couldn’t be saved.

That’s why... she had to rebel against it.

Even if it was just, this wind that blew in her heart would never stop.

That’s why... she could hear that voice.

“Wake up,” it said.

“Wake up and go and achieve what you must.”

The voice of temptation whispered closely into her ear.

This was a curse. A curse born from causing pain to her father and mother that would surely never be released until the day she died.

★

After successfully escaping from the southern plaza, Felmenia, wary of any pursuers, changed her escape route from the main streets to the alleyways. Not long after, she was rushing down the alley that was home to the Yakagi residence. Once there, after pushing aside some chairs, she laid Suimei down on a table that was set up outside. As she did, Lefille—who had been worriedly waiting outside for their return—rushed over with a pale face.

“L-Lady Felmenia! What happened?!”

Lefille looked at both Suimei and Felmenia in a panic. Felmenia went on to explain what had happened in the southern plaza with a troubled look on her face. About how Elliot was there too. About

how Graziella had ordered a compulsory draft upon them to search for the culprit. And about how Suimei had fought with Graziella in a magicka battle to try and avoid it. After getting the gist of things from Felmenia, Lefille groaned with a grim complexion.

"Even for Suimei-kun, fighting Princess Graziella with those wounds was quite severe, huh..."

"I am ashamed after telling you to leave it all to me. I was absolutely unable to cut in on Suimei-dono and Her Imperial Highness Graziella's fight. I could only run away..."

"No, with Princess Graziella as an opponent, you managed to run away while carrying a single person. That's a feat only you could accomplish, Lady Felmenia. But that damn Graziella... She really just did whatever she wanted."

Was the change in her tone of voice due to anger? Lefille glared into the distance as though at the imperial princess, and gripped her fist firmly.

"Lefille?"

"...Hmm? Oh, my, it's nothing. Setting that aside, Lady Felmenia, how is Suimei-kun?"

"As far as external wounds go, there does not seem to be anything that bad. This is likely due to the expansion and dampening of his mana in an instant. Though..."

"He's in a considerable amount of pain."

Suimei, who was lying down on top of the table, had his eyes closed and was moaning in pain. It was like he was having a nightmare.

"The symptoms do not seem serious, so I believe he will be alright..."

"Then there's nothing to do but let him rest, huh?"

During this exchange, Lefille suddenly felt a presence towards the alleyway entrance. It may have been a pursuer. Seizing this ominous premonition, she let out a menacing loud voice as she asked their identity.

"Who's there?!"

Perhaps because the presence was startled by her voice, the shadow that Lefille could just barely see jumped a bit. And then, stepping from the alleyway...

"This is... I seem to have surprised you."

The man who appeared apologetically was the elfin employee from the Imperial University Library, Romeon. Felmenia, who had

met him once before, called out to him when she recognized him.

"If I remember, are you not the librarian? What brings you here?"

"You see, I just so happened to catch a glimpse of you in the streets. You were carrying Yakagi-kun, Stingray-san, so I thought that perhaps something had happened with that culprit and came over out of concern."

"Is that so...?"

Romeon, who walked partway towards Felmenia and the others, then questioned them on the matter.

"It seems that Yakagi-kun has lost consciousness, but what happened?"

"He fought with Her Imperial Highness Graziella in the southern plaza, and, um..."

"My goodness, Geo Malifex? Just why would he do such a thing...?"

As Romeon's surprise showed on his face, Suimei seemed to wake and raised his head from the table while still lying down.

"Suimei-kun!"

"You're awake!"

As Felmenia and Lefille raised joyous voices, Suimei, who was still dazed from passing out, looked around his surroundings to get a grasp of the current situation.

"Urgh... We're home?"

"Yes, we are in front of the house now. I came here in a hurry, and not that much time has passed."

As Felmenia gave a brief report, Suimei once more showed her his gratitude.

"Aah, sorry. You carried me here, right? Thank y—eh? Mr. Librarian, you're here too...?"

"Yes. I arrived just a moment ago. I saw you two in the streets and followed you out of concern."

"I see..."

Suimei replied with a stiff expression. As he did, Romeon turned towards him.

"Yakagi-kun, your body seems to be in pretty bad shape. Would you mind if I had a look at you?"

Romeon was offering up his experience as a magical doctor, and he was looking at Suimei with quite a serious face.

"I'll be fine. I understand my own body best, after all. I only

passed out because I let out too much of my mana at once."

"Is that so...?"

Suimei politely turned down Romeon's offer and got up. He then started walking towards the exit of the alleyway, and Lefille called out to him in a panic.

"Suimei-kun, where are you going?!"

"I'm going to search for Liliana. Now that they're looking for her in earnest, I need to find her quickly."

"S-Suimei-dono? I do not think that is something you should be saying in this situation..."

Looking at the two girls who were trying to convince him not to go on this unreasonable errand, Romeon spoke up in a dubious tone.

"Could it be... that you mean to go search for the culprit behind the coma incidents?"

"...Yeah."

"Yakagi-kun, cease this. What do you intend to do with your body in this condition? Right now, you are about to do something far too reckless. Until you've properly healed, it would be better to put off your manhunt."

"..."

Suimei came to a silent stop upon hearing Romeon's objection. From behind him, Felmenia and Lefille quickly joined in to try and get through to him.

"It is just as Romeon-dono says, Suimei-dono. Please restrain yourself here."

"That's it, Suimei-kun. They're right. You shouldn't act rashly."

"...Got it."

Convinced by the three of them, Suimei gave up and plunked himself down on a chair, facing away from them. Seeing this, Romeon worriedly called out to him.

"...Then I will be going, Yakagi-kun. Please do not do anything rash."

Suimei raised his hand in a wave for his answer while still facing away from the group. Romeon then bowed to Felmenia and Lefille, and returned to the main street. After a short while...

"...Is he gone?"

Suimei looked over his shoulder and asked Felmenia about Romeon's whereabouts. He did so in an unusually low tone. Seeing his sharp gaze, she lightly turned her head to look at the street.

“Huh? Yes, Romeon-dono has taken his leave.”

“I see.”

Suimei stood up from the chair upon hearing Felmenia’s reply, though he didn’t look like he was about to go inside the house. Picking up on the nuances of his behavior, Felmenia turned a stern expression on him.

“Suimei-dono, you couldn’t...”

“S-Suimei-kun! Didn’t we just tell you not to go?”

“I’m going to rest for a bit. But seriously, if we don’t make our move now, things might get pretty hairy.”

“Why now? Why are you in that much of a hurry? It isn’t like you.”

“Yeah, I’m in a hurry. If it were just that dangerous woman, it would still be fine. But there may be more than that going on. Sorry, but I’ll have to ask the two of you to split up and search for Liliana too. Please.”

There was a certain amount of urgency in his voice... He spoke as though he was politely trying to make a request of strangers. Hearing him talk like that, Lefille let out a sigh.

“Hahh...”

“You won’t?”

“That’s not it. But—”

“Suimei-dono, how do I put it...? What you’re saying is odd. Back at the royal castle, you said you did not want to get caught up in any danger. But now here in the imperial capital, you’re chasing after it by your own will.”

Felmenia’s voice as she said all that in astonishment was mixed with a light sigh. Her opinion was in line with Lefille’s. And having his lack of virtue prodded at, Suimei weakly winced.

“I-I get that... But this is about picking my fights, you know? Same as anyone else, there are times I have to pass, and times that I have to take action.”

“That’s true, certainly, but...”

“For me, this is one of those times. That’s why I have to go.”

Hearing this, Lefille frowned and added her two cents rather frankly.

“Well, I understand that there are times you have to do what you have to do, Suimei-kun. But there *will* be another scolding.”

“Aw, come on, Lefi. Please spare me the scolding.”

“No. It isn’t enough just to be looking ahead. I feel it would be

better if we all discussed it together."

"Got it. I'll give you as much time as you want afterwards. At least grant me that much... How about it?"

Suimei once more petitioned them, and Lefille took a strict attitude this time.

"Under the condition that you don't act recklessly until your body has healed."

"Okay. Roger that."

Felmenia then looked at Suimei earnestly and spoke her mind too.

"I would be happy to offer my assistance."

"Thanks and sorry. You're a great help."

After conveying his gratitude to Felmenia, Suimei began tending to his wounds with healing magicka. As he touched his hand against the affected regions, a pale green glow could be seen. Particles of light and a green mist rose to the air. Like he suddenly remembered something, Suimei turned towards Felmenia.

"Now that I think about it, Menia, earlier you were wary of pursuers, but you didn't catch on that the librarian was tailing you?"

"Huh? Oh, no. I did not notice him at all until Lefille did."

"I also only caught on after he was close enough for me to see."

"I see..."

Hearing this, Suimei fell deep into thought like he was turning something over in his head quite seriously. Seeing this, Lefille called out to him.

"Suimei-kun, what did you mean earlier when you said it would be fine if it was only Graziella involved?"

"I meant that it's possible that there are others making their move. I don't have any proof yet, though."

"Who would that be? Is it the culprit?"

"I'll explain when I'm more sure of what's going on. Sorry, but please wait until then."

Once he'd healed himself, Suimei immediately got up and walked once more towards the exit of the alley.

★

The imperial capital of Filas Philia was originally built to function as a fortress city. Because of that, its structure was fairly

complex. The city was divided into districts using the concept of compartmentalization, and at a glance, it looked like a very well organized layout. Looking closer, however, it was an elaborate maze of alleys and dead ends. Without a firm grasp of its design, it wouldn't be easy to assault. Ancient traps, arbitrary dead ends that didn't take into consideration the nearby houses, old waterways, and other dangerous diversions and such had been left as they were for a long, long time.

It was a setup which troubled both foreigners and locals alike. The ramparts surrounding the city were tall, and the exits were located at the north and south ends. Passage both in and out of the city was severely restricted at nighttime. Each and every district housed a station for the military police. Looking at it from another perspective, it could be said they were all jails.

And all this was also troublesome to the girl who had been forced on the run with no end in sight.

Just how much time had passed since she donned her black robe and concealed herself from the eyes of the public? Thanks to the wanted posters spreading around, Liliana continued to flee regardless of whether it was day or night through the restless streets of Filas Philia. She was living through these unpredictable days on barely any sleep and ignoring the condition of her remaining mana.

To navigate the aforementioned maze of alleys, it was necessary to carefully choose her route. It would be unacceptable if she carelessly exited onto the large main streets. It wasn't just the military police and soldiers moving around she had to be worried about. Even the citizens were talking about her and keeping an eye out for her now. If she listened closely on any given street corner, she could hear them talking.

"The human weapon was the culprit of the coma incidents."

"She's on the run in the imperial capital."

"She may be rampaging in the middle of the city right now."

With how much people knew about her, a robe wouldn't be enough to hide her.

"..."

Liliana recalled what had happened up until now as she looked at the cloudy sky. About how she attacked the nobles who aimed to overthrow Rogue, about how she fought with Suimei Yakagi, and about how she'd ultimately obeyed the tall shadow that night... Was that really the right choice? Between the fear of being caught and

the anxiety of not achieving her goals, she'd shaken off Suimei Yakagi's kindness and ran away.

Indeed, Liliana had something that she must accomplish. She had to take care of what was threatening the person dearest to her. But if she'd just admitted to her crimes, cast aside her dark magic, and become friends with him, it was possible that she could have returned to a proper path. Such thoughts floated through her head.

That night, Suimei had asked if she was really okay with what she was doing as she continued to use her dark magic. He wanted to release her from that path. They'd barely ever spoken, but every time they did, she rejected him for her own sake. But he'd pushed her out of the way of her own dark magic and taken the damage for her. When she thought back on it, up until now, she'd never known anyone like him. Even when her dark power went berserk, he ignored his own safety to save her. And then he'd smiled.

It was the first time anyone had ever smiled at her. That's why, as she recalled the hand that was extended out to her, an indescribable panic gripped her. A homesickness she'd never known about wrenched her heart. Because it was probably the last time, too. The first and last kindness that would ever be shown to her.

"Suimei Yakagi..."

Unknowingly, his name spilled from her lips. It just may have been that she was praying for him to appear, or a sign of her true feelings. She knew that this longing that came far too late was regret. Yet still she prayed.

"Fight, Liliana. If you do, depending on the circumstances, you will be needed."

"Hngh..."

Those words she'd once heard from the tall shadow tortured her heart and condemned her. *Fight.* If she didn't, she would lose her place in the world. Nobody would need her. There was no significance to her life other than her ability to hurt others. She had to be strong. She was unable to shake that voice. Squatting down and leaning against the stony wall of a building, before long, the vacillating of her heart came to a stop. The yearning and pain gripping her up until now had vanished somewhere.

"I am... For the colonel's sake..."

She must fight. It was just as the shadow said. She who possessed the power of darkness would never be accepted by anyone. That had been true from the moment she was born. She

had been ostracized by everyone. This was not just limited to the people in the village she lived in. Even her mother and father had always looked at her like she was something repulsive.

After coming to the imperial capital, nothing had changed. No matter what street she walked down, people still looked at her the same hateful way. Suimei Yakagi alone had been different. The act of extending his hand to her must have been an act to get her to let her guard down. After all, he was trying to catch the culprit behind the coma incidents. That's why she must fight. For the sake of protecting the only person who'd ever given her a purpose—Rogue.

There was still no sign of the tall shadow trying to make contact with her. After urging her to escape, she'd received no further communication. They'd probably cut her loose. But as that thought passed through her mind, she could no longer stop.

"—?!"

While in the middle of thinking of such things, her shoulders suddenly jumped. It was an extra sense she'd mastered as someone feared by others—there was someone behind her. It would be bad if she was found. She had to hide herself quickly. After a short while, the presence had passed and there was no more attention directed at her. She had not been discovered. She timidly peeked out of her concealment and observed where she had just been standing. What she saw there was neither the military police nor soldiers.

"Dad, Mom, hurry up! Let's go!"

What came into her sight was a single family walking along harmoniously: a father, a mother, and their small boy. As the young boy urged his parents on, the father caught up with him and took his hand with a smile. The mother watched over them warmly while chasing them, saying, "It's dangerous if you don't watch where you're going!"

All of them shared a smile. Even in the imperial capital currently gripped by a crisis, they were all laughing like they were having fun.

"It will soon be the hero's parade. Where should we go today? There are street performers on the main street."

"Dad! Hey, Dad! I want to eat some sweets!"

"Didn't you just have some back home...?"

"I want sweeeeets!"

"Hmmm, but..."

"Hey, you can't say such selfish things."

“But...”

“It’s just the thing to do. When we get back to the street, shall we look for some?”

“Yay!”

The young boy threw both his arms in the air in delight. The mother, who was watching this, let out an exasperated sigh, but she definitely did not show any displeasure on her face.

“...!”

Liliana wanted to run away. This kind of scene was just too far removed from her. As she turned away, the voices of the happy family behind her stirred up her heart. She wanted to get away from them as quickly as possible. If she didn’t, that sight of a happy family that one could find anywhere might awaken something dark lurking within her.

Liliana ran with all her might, and before she knew it, she came out onto the main street. It was far too careless of her considering the fact that she was a wanted woman, but for the moment, it restored the peace in her heart.

She let out a relieved breath. That family wasn’t here. The happy voice of the young boy, the delighted voice of the moved father, and the laughing voice of the mother watching over them gently. Amid the chaotic din of footsteps and the other hustle and bustle of the street, she could no longer hear them. Her heart was finally at peace. But it didn’t last for long.

“Hey, you in the black robe over there!”

“—?!”

As Liliana turned towards the strict voice, she was met with the sight of several approaching military policemen. She’d been discovered. As she groaned internally, one of the military policemen who seemed to be a commanding officer stepped forward.

“The entire city is currently on watch for someone who’s about your height and description. Take off your hood.”

“...”

“What’s wrong? You won’t take it off? It can’t be... You!”

When she didn’t comply with his order, the other military policemen sidled up. Liliana reflexively stepped back. The military police officer judged that to be an attempt to escape, and ordered the others into action.

“Capture her!”

A magic whistle then rang in the air. Before long, military

policemen began pouring in from all over. Right in the middle of the street, Liliana was surrounded in an instant. This sudden development got the attention of all the nearby foot traffic. With Liliana at the center, the military police had completely fenced her in, and they were surrounded then again by a crowd of citizens.

The military police were being vigilant about magic and hesitated to get any closer. However, after seeing that Liliana wasn't chanting no matter how much they waited, they readied their batons and charged in. Liliana evaded their attacks with nimble footwork. She would not use magic so lightly. Her mana was largely depleted, so she could not use it wastefully. However, at this rate, with only a limited hand to play, all her options were bad. Realizing that, impatience began to heat up within her body. "This is bad" was the only phrase that came to mind to describe the situation. Perhaps because she was gripped by such thoughts, she met with one of the police batons.

"Kyah!"

As she was sent flying, her hood was blown off. As her face was revealed, she could hear the military policemen who saw it gasping.

"Just as I suspected..."

Matching the commanding officer's groan, she could hear the crowd surrounding the military policemen stirring. Their voices were fearful.

"Hey, that's the girl they've been searching for..."

"The human weapon..."

"It's the culprit behind the incidents."

Even the military police around her were looking at her like she was a demon or monster. As she looked around, such gazes were being cast at her from all directions.

"Hngh..."

Why did everyone always look at her with those eyes? Like they were seeing something repulsive? Even though she had not even done anything. Even though she was not born with this power because she wanted it. Even though she'd never wished for the unhappiness of others.

"Eek!"

The crowd then collectively shrieked and turned pale. For some reason, they had all been gripped by fear in an instant. And then, before Liliana could determine the reason why, the answer poured in from the surroundings.

“What’s... with that eye...?”

“M-Monster! It’s a monster’s eye!”

Screams filled the air. She realized the eyepatch that covered her right eye had fallen to the ground. The blow from the police baton had snapped the string that held it up, revealing her repulsive right eye altered by the power of darkness. Liliana reflexively looked around. Everyone in sight was staring at her in fear and surprise a shade darker than usual.

It was the same way the people of her village had looked at her when they declared her a portent of calamity and ostracized her. Filled with dark emotions, those eyes, those eyes, those eyes...

“A-AAAAAAAAAAH!”

From the dark depths of her heart, suppressed memories of her past burst through and began overflowing. They were the memories of a time that she never wanted to remember again. From when she was determined to be the source of all of humanity’s misfortune. And the malice that came with it.

“Wait!”

“Don’t let her get away!”

Liliana ran. The sharp voices behind her gave chase, along with a stampede of footsteps. She’d only been able to get away because they were all caught off guard over seeing her right eye. She dove into an alley and ran with all her might.

“Hahh, hahh...”

Liliana had no idea where she was running. After a while, she came to a stop in some alley to catch her breath, which had long since run out. She’d somehow managed to give the crowd the slip. No...

There is still... someone there...

There was a presence behind her. Had one of the military policemen caught up to her? It didn’t seem like it. The presence was extremely thin, and that kind of stealth skill wasn’t something the military police possessed. When she turned around, she could see a single black shadow stretching out in the umbra of a building. It continued to stretch out, like it was creeping out of the darkness. Before long, after the shadow had stretched out completely, what appeared was...

“There you are, Liliana.”

“C-Colonel...?”

It was her adoptive father and superior officer, Rogue Zandyke.

Seeing his figure, she was fraught with emotion. Perhaps he had come to look for her since she hadn't returned home. But then why was he unsheathing the sword at his waist?

"Liliana, you have made your resolve, haven't you?"

"What...?"

A bewildered voice slipped out of her mouth. She couldn't understand what was going on at all.

"Liliana."

"Please... wait. What do you mean... resolve?"

Just what kind of resolve did she need in this encounter with the man who was supposed to be her father? He should have come to save her, so why did he have that strained look on his face? No matter how long she waited, no answer came. All she heard in response were his cold and stiff footsteps drawing nearer.

"Colonel... What are..."

"Is it not obvious? I have come to take responsibility and uphold my duty. For the sake of punishing you for the crimes you've committed."

"Why... Colonel, why..."

She wanted to ask him why he was doing this. Liliana had only ever committed those crimes for the man standing in front of her. Why must she be the one to take the punishment for them?

"Colonel! I... for your sake!"

"I do not want to hear your excuses. As a soldier of the Empire, you should be aware of your own liability."

"N-No... That can't... Colonel..."

The naked blade drew nearer as Liliana shrank away. Its point came down towards her. Was she about to be killed? As this thought flashed through her mind, Liliana's body moved on its own.

I don't want to die.

Her will to live acted on her behalf. Before she knew what was happening, she'd evaded Rogue's sword.

"...Liliana."

Rogue muttered her name. His expression had become a shadow and was no longer visible. No, it was that she didn't want to see it. If even he beheld her as something repulsive, her heart would certainly break at last. Rogue's slow and composed movements once more came into her field of vision.

And once more, light glinted off his blade. Following the light that threatened to blind her, the tip of the blade thrust forward... At

this rate, she would be killed. By the man she called Colonel, the man she idolized as a father. By the person she held dearest in the world.

"No... NOOOOOOOO!"

Rogue's thrust pierced the wall right next to her. Without pausing to think that the chance before her was indeed a chance, Liliana once more began running.

★

Liliana ran away from Rogue. Being so completely absorbed in fleeing at full speed down these dark, narrow alleyways, just how many times had she fallen over now? She was covered in dirt and scratches. Her clothes were completely tattered.

Where she arrived after fleeing for her life was the city slums. It was a gloomy place, like she'd run into darkness. She was surrounded by the tall walls of buildings, and the cloudy sky above her that looked like it might give way to rain at any time. There was no way daylight would reach her here.

And on top of the gloom, the area was filled with a strong stink. It was as if all of the imperial capital's pollution was gathered here. But in her flight, this was the only place she could come. After Rogue turned his back on her, she no longer had anywhere to call home. So that no one would find her, she'd come here to find a dark corner to hide in. She hugged her knees while trembling.

If that man had abandoned her, the only path before her was to die in obscurity like this.

With that thought, tears naturally began overflowing from her eyes. With no outlet for her emotions, her anguished cries and sobbing from the depths of her heart would never come out. Only the tears that flooded out of the corners of her eyes and fell down her cheeks. Her entire life up to this point had been a deception. In the end, she could only live in abject solitude. She realized that she was completely powerless.

Thinking back on it, for as long as she'd been aware of her surroundings, she was only ever ostracized by others. Anyone who saw her face would claim that she never should have been born. Why did it have to be her? Why was it only her? She'd wondered such things countless times already. Just because she could naturally use the power of darkness, why did she have to be so

loathed by people? Even though she never intended to do anything bad. Even though she never really wanted to hurt anybody. Despite all that, whenever anybody first saw her, they would all look at her the same way.

Liliana recalled the family that she saw earlier. Just casually walking through the streets of the imperial capital, they'd all looked so very happy. The father, mother, and child all had each other and their smiles like it was perfectly natural.

A father, mother, and child. They were just people too; they weren't any different from Liliana. So why did the Goddess not share those smiles with her? She wasn't being selfish. Even if it was just a little—even a tiny bit would be fine—she wanted to have a little of that warmth from the smile of a father and mother.

The little boy had begged his father for sweets. And his father, though troubled, complied readily. His mother was looking after them, but not in a scolding way. There was just an undeniable warmth between all of them. The way they were was dazzling. Liliana was envious.

She had never once, not to her mother or father or even Rogue, begged someone for something she wanted. So just why was that young boy allowed to do such a thing? In spite of seeming to know nothing of hardship, pain, or sorrow?

"Ah..."

As she heard footsteps approaching, her voice leaked out. Someone else had come crawling into this place that was like the depths of a drain. Was it someone who had gotten lost in the labyrinthine city streets? Or perhaps a vagrant? Was it the military police on patrol? Or was it Rogue? Liliana turned towards them, and briefly, as the clouded light shined down on them, their appearance became clear. That recognizable face was...

"You people... are..."

"To think that you were in this kinda place, huh? Human weapon. No, criminal."

"It is just as we heard. Our luck must be good."

What reached her ears were voices overflowing with blatant, undisguised cruelty. These were the people hired by the nobles who thought poorly of Rogue, the same mages she had previously quarreled with, one of which spoke rudely and the other courteously. The gloomy light revealed their eyes, glittering with hate and malicious intent.

“What did you... come here for?”

“Ain’t it obvious? You know, *that* kinda thing...”

“You have made utter fools of us until now.”

“So we’re gonna make you fucking pay for all of it!”

The mages were drawing nearer. This was the last stop in Liliana’s flight, so there was no longer anywhere for her to run away to. The moment she stood up, the man with the courteous voice began chanting a spell. Various objects in their surroundings were lifted up by wind magic, and then came flying towards her together with a sudden gust.

“Ugh, guh!”

Unable to endure, Liliana fell to the ground. While she was gripped by pain, the next attack came rushing in. The one chanting this time was the rude man. The magic he spun together with a violent tone brought forth fire that encircled her.

“A-Agh... guh...”

As if whispering to her that they had no intention of killing her quickly, the flame’s heat intensified and stole the oxygen from her, slowly tormenting her. Liliana’s figure as she squirmed in suffocating pain was just like a fish fresh out of the water or an insect with its wings plucked. Hot air was pouring down her throat as the heat from the flames baked her skin.

She sealed her throat in pain and collapsed to the ground. And after who knows how long, she was gasping for air in labored breaths. She came to realize that the circle of flames that was torturing her had vanished. In its stead, the mages were now looming over her. Pain descended down on her. Her head, her arms, her back, her feet... they trampled on all of it. She was being treated like trash thrown away into an alley.

In the brief interval between blows, she looked up and saw the laughing faces of the two men. They truly found tormenting Liliana enjoyable from the bottom of their hearts. Hatred consumed her in the moment, but then suddenly, Liliana recalled what someone once told her. She shouldn’t let the malice swallow her. She couldn’t surrender herself to hatred. If she entrusted her heart to it even once, she would lose who she truly was.

“Hey, what’s wrong? You’re not gonna use some fucking magic like last time?! That it?!”

“It seems that her mana is already depleted. The youngest of the Elite Twelve has certainly fallen low.”

But there was no need for her to endure this. After all, even if she obstinately fixated on her sense of self, she could never attain the things she wanted.

"What's with that fucking eye?! Turns out they didn't just call you a monster! You really fucking are one, huh?!"

The rude man kicked her hard. Her body rolled along the stone pavement of the alley and slammed into a nearby wall. She no longer felt pain. She had forgotten what pain even was. The flames of hatred burning within her was all the torment she could feel right now.

"Oh, what? That got you in the mood? You wanna fight back now that you're in that kind of worn-out state? HAHAHAHAHA!"

"To go through so much punishment and still stand up... A monster like you should only grovel on the ground like the despicable creature you are."

Their sneering voices were extremely grating to her ears. That's why, no matter what kind of power she used, she wanted to blow them away.

"I..."

This would be the last time. Surely she would lose herself from this. But in this world of nothing but pain, she had no regrets about vanishing. There was nothing wrong with being swallowed by the darkness. If she did, everything would end. Just like that rampaging repulsive figure that night, it was fine for her to just destroy everything and make it all vanish. The nobles, the mages before her, the streets of the imperial capital, the citizens, that happy family. Anything and everything. If it all vanished, her loneliness would certainly vanish as well. That's why...

"Vanish..."

"Ah?"

"Vanish... Vanish..."

"What? Did you lose your mind?"

"Vanish! Vanish! Vanish! Vanish! Vanish! Vanish! Vanish! Vanish!"

Everything would vanish. Just as she was about to awaken something dark, she heard an unfamiliar noise. A rapid tapping that was regular, but both stiff and high-pitched. Was it footsteps? She heard it from beyond where the mages were standing, deep within the shadow of a building.

"Buddhi brahma. Buddhi vidya."

[Awaken power. Along with great knowledge.]

"Ah..."

Invited by the resounding voice, she lifted her head and saw a shadow stretching out towards her. Before long, just where the shadow ended, a single man appeared.

"Asat nada arupa loka."

[That voice that reaches far and wide is high above in the heavens.]

That man clad in unfamiliar black clothing was humming something like a murmur. His figure was somehow lonely, like a god of death calling out to somebody on their deathbed.

"Kalavinka mahamaya om karuma samkri."

[Ye who possesseth the sweet echo shall release the original sin.]

But the man didn't stop. The continued tapping of his footsteps rang out in the air as he approached.

"...You lot never learn, huh? Is it that fun to torment someone?"

The man's exasperated voice resonated throughout the alley. With his head hung, Liliana couldn't see just what sort of expression he was making. He was like a quiet water surface without a single ripple in it, lamenting for the helpless ones before him. The rude mage turned around and to face this man, and as he came into his line of sight, his eyes widened in surprise.

"You're..."

"That country hick who got in our way that one time... Just what business do you have in this place?"

The courteous mage of the two seemed to recognize him, which jogged his companion's memory.

"Ah, that's right! You're that punk looking for the culprit of the coma incidents, right?"

"That reminds me—I heard you were quarreling with the hero," said the more courteous mage as he raised a hand to his chin.

"Look, this here monster is that culprit, you got it?"

"The culprit that you are looking for was this girl. And to be pretending to work for the sake of the Empire... She's a terrible villain."

Liliana heard a jeering laugh. Then the man in black snorted like he was not amused at all.

"A villain? The villains are you guys, right?"

"What'd you say?"

"I don't know what you're trying to say. Care to enlighten me?"

"The fact that you have to ask... Something is seriously wrong

with you guys."

"Whaaat?!"

"Have even your ears gone bad? Seriously, there's just no helping extravagant idiots like you two, is there?"

Perhaps because they sensed the hostility in that cool-headed declaration, the mages put themselves on guard.

"Hey! Don't come any fucking closer!"

"Impossible... Are you planning on supporting this criminal?"

"Yeah, it's just as you say. I'm here to do the impossible."

Hearing that, the courteous mage scoffed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Then you have made a terrible blunder. That voice earlier... It sounded something like a chant for a spell, but it would have been better if you'd just quickly fired your magic at us from behind and caught us unawares."

"This time it's two against one. We'll fucking beat you to death here too."

The two mages pronounced a death sentence for the man in black. However, it was like he was fixated on something specific in what they'd said, and was murmuring as if to identify it.

"A blunder, huh...?"

The man hanging his head suddenly unleashed an indescribable dread. At the same time, a wind blew into the area from out of nowhere and it began to get noisy.

"Wha...?"

"Whaaat?!"

The two mages were bewildered by the rapid change, and the man in black spoke up as if to inform them of what was happening.

"Beyond the land that we live in, in the heavens beyond the distance... In the lands of paradise, there is a being known as Kalavinka with the head of a human and the body of a bird. The absolute beauty of its voice, that excellent bird-like voice, is extolled as peerless. To a scholar of the mysteries, it is a voice that is heard from the emission of a higher order ego when they advance to the next level as a human. It is considered as a kind of revelation."

"You punk!"

"Speaking of more incomprehensible things...!"

"This magicka is something that manifests the hum of a being that exists beyond fantasy: Kalavinka. In general, the emission of a

higher order ego can only be brought on by a high-ranking magician. In fact, you have to be a high-ranking magician to hear Kalavinka's hum. If an inexperienced magician bore witness to such a thing... Well, what do you think would happen?"

Behind that inquisitive manner of speech was not a provocative tone. When the mages looked closely, the man in black had eyes that were tainted in a deep crimson as if they were burning. This was Suimei Yakagi. It was as if he was gazing at an enemy he could never forgive. What shined beneath those eyes was a strong will and indignation.

"Samadhi kalpa devana gara."

[Thou shalt listen to the eternal voice of the lotus.]

"Sh-Shit!"

"Oh wind! Thou art the power of eternity! Become a—"

Before that humming voice could continue, the mages caught on to his dangerously increasing strength and began to move. However, it was far too late.

"Samadhi kalpa nada."

[Thou shalt listen to the eternal echo.]

The light that engulfed them was an enormous, brilliant scarlet magic circle that drew itself beneath their feet. The shapes, letters, and symbols all had a blood red luminescence. Perhaps due to this, the stone pavement appeared to sink into a black shadow. It was as if the gloomy area that they were standing on was being drowned away. The only thing that remained to be seen was the red light's brilliant dazzle. The men could not move. Gripped by the bizarre atmosphere, right now, for a moment, even their thoughts were completely bound. Then...

"Vahana amana samskara buddhi karanda thrishna."

[Thou shalt entrust your body to the sublimation of the laws passed down by the three realms, and surrender thyself to the sweet voice of thirst.]

All that was left was...

"Neigh of Kalavinka."

As Suimei Yakagi spoke the keywords, the brilliant red light began to overflow and disorient all those who saw it. It was as if, in the middle of that light, they were no longer able to distinguish between up and down, heaven and earth. When she focused on the boundless light that filled her vision, Liliana felt like she saw the sparkling silhouette of something like an enormous flying bird for

an instant in a dazzle, but it soared away along with the humming of its sweet voice.

"Ah..."

As the dazzling light on the other side of her eyelids began to fade, Liliana opened her eyes slowly. What came into her vision was the two mages, both fallen to the stone pavement after having almost all of their mana stolen from them. There was absolutely no sign of movement from them. In other words, as that flying bird ascended, it had taken their power with it.

"For an inexperienced magician, prematurely listening to that gospel is nothing but poison. When a low-ranked magician is exposed to that higher order ego, the selfishness of their weak ego will run wild and vanish. The power of mana, which is the embodiment of their desires, as well as the means of its use, including control of their spells... It's all relinquished. That's the power of Kalavinka's sweet voice. It's an anti-magician magicka meant to be used against people like you."

As Suimei spoke, the two men glanced at him.

"Do not ever again hold on to the delusion that you are strong magicians. You stupid idiots."

And then, after an exasperated grumble with a tinge of pity mixed in, he left the two mages as they were and walked forward. Tap, tap, tap... The slow, composed footsteps on the pavement were audible as he approached. And before long, he stopped right in front of Liliana's eyes.

"...I was a little late, huh?"

His voice sounded both apologetic and relieved. Had he come for her? Even at the cost of pushing his own wounded body? That regretful figure excited the warmth she had lost in her heart. Liliana let out a long sigh. Unwittingly, it was flooded with emotions. Even now, this man hadn't changed. Even after being wounded by the power of her darkness, even after she turned her back on him and ran away from his wishes, even as he looked at her monstrous face... He still came to save her. She was happy. She was extremely happy. Yet despite that, for some reason, she could only summon barbed words for him.

"Did you come... to capture me?"

"Nope," he said with a shake of the head.

"You'll... hand me over to the military police, right? You should want... to catch the culprit... behind the incidents."

“I’m not gonna do that.”

“Then, did you come... to kill me?”

Suimei Yakagi once more shook his head. He had no intention of doing such a thing.

“Then just what did you... come here to do?”

“I came to pick you up.”

As she heard these words, Liliana once more let out a long sigh. It was just as she was anticipating. After all, this man had come to save her. Just as he did on that evening. However...

“Please don’t... come closer.”

The words that came out of her mouth were a rejection. If she took this man’s hand here, it would just result in a repeat of the same thing. Deep in her heart, she heard this whisper from herself. But even so, Suimei Yakagi drew closer.

“Don’t come closer...”

As if to shake off the happiness coiling around her, she shook her head. She was nearly at her wits’ end. She didn’t want him to come to her. That was a lie. She was scared of changing herself. If she accepted what she wanted most in the world, she felt like she would once more fall into great despair. More so than the happiness that was filling her heart now, she was far more scared of having that feeling betrayed. But even so, Suimei Yakagi spoke without changing at all.

“Liliana, you can certainly take the easy way out and live out a quiet, small life here. That may be something you think you want. However—”

Suimei Yakagi stopped before Liliana, who shrank back like she was sinking into the floor. When she looked up, he was smiling down on her... It was no dream. The gentle voice he spoke to her with was nothing like the call of a god of death calling one on their deathbed.

“Liliana, that which you desire can’t be found anywhere in this kind of place, so...”

Yes, that’s why she must...

“So let’s go home. The place that you belong, the place you can always return to... Nobody will ever steal that from you again.”

Before he could put all of her happy dreams into words, she reached out and grabbed the hand that was held out to her.

★

Rain was now falling with a gentle, constant pitter-patter. As if calling the rain, the stone pavement that knew nothing of the sky absorbed the drops one by one. His clear heart would never be able to maintain itself this way. As if pierced by the raindrops, his heart was soaked through by an indescribable loneliness.

He always wondered why this world was made to be so relentless against the weak.

To save someone who could not be saved, he would move immediately. Yet the world tried over and over to deny him. Just why was it like that? Those who drowned in tears only ever had their sorrow. Those who drowned in anger with no way to let it out only ever fell into despair.

However, that irrationality may just be the principle of the world. And what he was doing was for the purpose of facing that principle head-on and challenging it. Whatever order there might be to the world, he wielded magicka to try and change it. He rebelled against it. It was a rebellion against divine providence; he understood it was not something that could be forgiven. He knew that all too well after the fate that had befallen his father.

Suimei had lost his family, but that couldn't possibly be compared to what this girl has suffered, ostracized by everyone. His feelings of wanting to save her were nothing more than the arrogance of one who was blessed.

Even so, even if it was only a little, even just a tiny bit, he wanted to clear away that sadness of hers, that painful loneliness. The young girl who was crying in his arms was now letting out all of the tears she'd never been able to shed before. The scream of sorrow she had been unable to voice before, she now turned towards the heavens. For what reason did this still helpless-looking girl have to be forced to bear such unhappiness? Without even knowing the common pleasure of a smile, she'd been forced to suffer. All she had to build herself off of was a tall pile of curses.

But even so, he believed she had kindness left in her heart. That she was still human. He still didn't know what kind of violence had been pushed on this girl. However...

"...Cry. When you want to cry, it's fine to just cry with all your heart. After that's over, eat delicious food to your heart's content and go to sleep. If you do that, you can forget all of those unpleasant things."

Saying this, he gently stroked the head of the girl who was

tightly clinging to him while crying to the heavens. He did so with affection, so that even if it was just for this moment, she could be at peace... It was entirely possible that he had come extremely late. If he had been faster, if he had come sooner—perhaps before even being summoned to this world—the result may have been different. But that was out of his hands. However, even so...

"I'll still make it in time. My magicka exists for this reason, after all..."

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Still embracing the warmth enveloping her, Liliana woke up. She'd dozed off in that warmth and, upon regaining her consciousness, relished it in something of a daze. She then straightened herself up. It seemed that she had been put to sleep in a bed somewhere. While hugging the pleasant, fluffy, pure white bed cover, she looked around the room. A rather cheap-looking fluffed-up chestnut carpet covered the floor, and sitting on top of it was plain wooden furniture without a hint of embellishment or gaudiness. She recalled seeing them before, but because her head was still in a daze, she could not properly identify where. And while still lost in the languid haze of her fading slumber, she asked nobody in particular...

"Where is this...?"

"So you're awake now?"

A young but dignified voice entered the room from the hall. It must have been from someone working nearby. A small girl with red hair turned up in the doorway. Liliana also recognized that face, but she couldn't match a name to it.

"You are...?"

"Oh? Are you still half asleep? I introduced myself before you went to sleep, didn't I?"

"Ah..."

Liliana remembered everything after she heard those words from the little girl who had both hands on her waist, Lefille Grakis. Liliana had been brought to this house by Suimei Yakagi, who intended to shelter her. When they arrived, Liliana was reintroduced to this young girl she'd met at the checkpoint. She also met another girl she'd encountered briefly during one of their night battles, a mage from the Kingdom of Astel named Felmenia

Stingray. And then, after having her first proper meal in a long time, she was allocated a bed, where she promptly fell asleep.

Recalling all this, she checked her right eye. Just like when she wore her usual eyepatch, her right field of vision was obscured, so nothing was out of the ordinary, but it seemed she'd been given a substitute eye patch.

An unknown shiver ran through her entire body. As she recalled what had happened when she was chased, and then how drastically different her current situation was, she shivered in fear. The inexpressible emotion that was overflowing in her shook her body with no signs of stopping. What if everything here, everything that had led her here, was all just a sweet dream? That fear was beckoning her. As if to deny it, she strongly hugged the bed covers against her body. And as she did, Lefille put her hand on her shoulder. Liliana raised her face, and was met with a gentle expression.

"Liliana."

"...What is it?"

"I'm going to go and call Suimei-kun, so just sit tight right here for a bit longer."

Lefille Grakis patted her shoulder tenderly. Had she seen through her? Did she know Liliana was seized with fear? Lefille put on a smile as if to try and dispel that fear, and then left the room.

★

A short while after Lefille exited, she returned with Suimei and Felmenia in tow. They each took a seat in the room with her. Liliana peeked at Suimei's face as he sat in the chair closest to her. As if verifying something, he looked at her with a discerning gaze. Before long, that stiff expression became relaxed.

"It seems you've calmed down, huh?"

"Yes, thanks to you."

Liliana expressed her gratitude and bowed her head. Suimei then pulled a cup out of thin air.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"No, I'm alright."

"I see."

As she said that, he erased the cup. Suimei's expression then turned quite serious.

“Now then, I’ll be cutting right to the chase, but there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

“About the incidents, right?”

There was no need to even ask. It was already something she knew would come. She knew, but the gaze she pointed at him stiffened along with her entire body. She was wondering if she would be driven away for talking about it. That anxiety unsettled her. Suimei, having guessed what was going on in Liliana’s head, made a gentle smile as if to calm her heart.

“No, I won’t drive you away. Rather, if I think about what’s happened so far, I don’t think you’ll really say anything that’s outside the realm of what I already know.”

“…Yes.”

“Well then, tell me about it.”

“I…”

Liliana calmed down after hearing his reassurance, but she was still concerned about the other two girls. Suimei was one thing, but what would they think? However, Lefille had an extremely serious air about her, her eyes closed and arms crossed. And Felmenia was giving Liliana a friendly smile. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. So steeling her resolve, she began to explain.

“I’ve spoken of it before… but Rogue Zandyke of the army’s intelligence division is my adoptive father. He was born a commoner, and reached his current position with his skills in magic and swordsmanship. However, because of that… he was called an upstart and was shunned and harassed by the nobles.”

“I see. Those born of high status trying to bully those of lower status is a common story, huh?”

“What petty people,” Lefille added on.

“So those mages were related to that?”

“Yes. They were… one of the forms of harassment. That malice never ceased, and as expected, it ended up affecting the colonel’s duties and actions. I was unable to bear it. I was impatient, and at that time, that person came into contact with me.”

“Do you not want to save your father?”

“That other black robe?”

“Yes. Just as I said before… while I was worried about the colonel, their words were like a revelation. I understood that I would be breaking the law, but I did not hesitate at all and accepted… The rest is just as everyone knows. During the night, I

used dark magic to put the nobles who were obstructing the colonel to sleep."

"So those are the details behind the incidents, huh?" Suimei said with a nod.

"Even though I wanted to be helpful to the colonel, now that I think about it, I think it was extremely shallow."

As Liliana made everything clear, after all this time, she became despondent upon facing the gravity of what she had done. This case was not just a violation of the laws of the Empire. No matter how underhanded her opponents were, she had acted improperly. Suimei was sitting still silently with his arms folded. On the other hand, Felmenia received a handkerchief from Lefille and was wiping away her tears.

"...Well, it could also be said that it couldn't be helped," Suimei finally said.

"What?"

"The things that you've done until now and the fact that they were things that you shouldn't have been doing... You properly understand—no, you believe that, don't you?"

As Suimei fired off this obscure question, thinking back on her explanation, Liliana agreed. He then began tapping his index finger against his forehead.

"Liliana, when you were causing the incidents, and when you weren't, you had doubts about your own actions, correct?"

"Not that much, but... the first time, somewhat."

"At the time, and it would only be sometimes, but that tall shadow... Didn't you hear that guy's voice offering you a suggestion?"

"Their voice? Now that I think about it..."

"As I thought, you seem to have some kind of clue about it, huh?"

Liliana took Suimei's words to heart and tried remembering. Certainly, when she first caused the incidents and also when she was running away, she could recall that person's words in her head. However, that should have been Liliana herself rebuking her halfhearted self in her mind. It wasn't something she really heard. As she looked up at Suimei upon reaching that conclusion, Suimei guessed what she was thinking and shook his head.

"It's magic. At some point, without you realizing it, that shadow hypnotized you."

"...Magic?"

"That's right."

"N-No, that's...!"

"Not in your memories, huh? That just goes to show how skilled that guy is with magic. In reality, you heard that voice and were strongly driven to continue the attacks, right?"

Liliana was unable to say anything back. After having the truth pointed out to her, inside her head, she gradually began to understand. To think she'd been used in such a way without even being aware of it was completely unthinkable to her. Realizing she was at a loss for words, Suimei spoke up again.

"That's why you don't need to worry about it. Sure, you did some things you shouldn't have, but that responsibility doesn't fall squarely on you. You were being taken advantage of."

"I understand that, but that magic..."

"I dispelled it while you were asleep. It's not a problem anymore."

Telling her it was alright, Suimei shrugged his shoulders. As Liliana bowed her head down in gratitude, he once more continued speaking.

"Did you not return to Colonel Rogue's place?"

"No. I did not know at all... where I should have gone... Besides, the colonel... abandoned me."

"Abandoned you?"

"I met him while fleeing... and he said... that I could not avoid taking responsibility..."

Liliana could not put the rest of it into words. A gloomy atmosphere began to spread through the room. Having hostility pointed at her by Rogue was painful. Suimei and the others seemed to grasp what she really meant, and all their expressions darkened.

"Did you tell him about it?"

"No. Regardless of the reason... I acted in violation of the law. I judged... that the colonel would not spare me any time... to hear me out."

After that, Felmenia finally spoke up.

"Even though it is adoptive, is he not your father?"

"The colonel... is a very upright person. I don't believe he would forgive me... for staining my hands with evil deeds."

He was just that kind of man. He would not forgive anything sinful. That's why Liliana became a target that he would destroy.

That's all there was to it. It was just, at that time, Rogue's hand as he thrust his sword forward had faltered...

"I do not resent him... The colonel has always... protected me all this time, after all."

It was her own fault for lending her ear to the schemes of the tall shadow. There was no way she could hate Rogue. A hush fell over the room for a while there, and Suimei was the one to break the silence.

"I have one more thing that I'd like to ask about the tall shadow. Do you know their name or any of their defining characteristics?"

"No, I don't have any specific clues... None at all. They always wore that black robe... with the hood up. On top of that, using some kind of magic... their identity became hard to grasp. I have practically no information regarding that person."

Hearing this, Suimei closed his eyes. He must have been carefully scrutinizing her words. It was not clear to Liliana just what kind of thoughts were swirling around in that mind of his. Watching this, fear once more gripped her heart.

"Um, from now on, what..."

What should I do?

As expected, she thought that she would be forced to leave. And as she began to ask about her fate, Suimei answered her with a calm expression.

"Hmm? It's fine. Just stay here."

"Is that... fine? I committed a sin, you know?"

"I said before it isn't really your fault, didn't I? If you ask me, those dumbass nobles got what they deserved. There's also the fact that black robe hypnotized you. Right now, being fully conscious of your own sins is more than enough punishment."

As he recklessly stated this with a single eye closed, Suimei crossed his legs.

"Well, there is a condition for you staying here though."

"What... should I do?"

"I called it a condition, but it's about your dark magic. I want you to stop using it... Or rather than that, I'd like you to learn the proper way of using it."

Liliana's expression stiffened at hearing Suimei's completely unexpected condition.

"...Why?"

“Did you think I was going to throw out a more amazing condition?”

“No. And just... what do you mean by amazing...?”

Suimei looked exasperated as Liliana looked down. She then threw one more of her unresolved doubts before him.

“‘The proper way to use it’... You said the same thing before... but just what is dark magic? You were talking like you understood it.”

“I am also interested in that,” said Felmenia.

She too wanted to learn about it. She leaned forward and looked at Suimei with a sparkle in her eyes.

“So Suimei-kun is going to start talking about difficult to understand things again, huh...?”

On the other hand, magic seemed to be one of Lefille’s weak points, and she looked slightly distressed at the prospect of this conversation.

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Suimei had said that he would be explaining dark magic, but he suddenly remembered that he had something he must ask Liliana.

“Sorry, there’s something I forgot to ask. Can I go ahead and get that out of the way?”

“What is it?”

“When you use magic, those words you sometimes append to the end of the chant... Did you learn them from the tall shadow?”

When Suimei asked that, Felmenia clapped her hands together as she remembered.

“The savage names, right?”

“Do you know of them?”

“We learned a bit about them from an acquaintance.”

When Felmenia cleared that up, Liliana proceeded to explain.

“Yes. I heard that it was magic to amplify the power of darkness and was told to proactively use it when I use magic from now on... I wasn’t fully convinced at first... but when I did as they told and added it to the end of the chant, the dark magic became stronger.”

“And so you used it. Hmm...”

While Suimei was deep in contemplation, he started speaking in a murmur.

“Nomina, barbara...”

“Is something... the matter?”

“Right now, what did you hear?”

Liliana cocked her head to the side at the strange question. Surely she was puzzled as to what meaning that question had at all. Urging her to answer with his gaze, Liliana answered with a puzzled expression still plastered on her face.

“I heard... savage names?”

“...That’s what it sounded like to you?”

“That’s right.”

“You too, Menia?”

“Yes, you said savage names.”

“I see.”

Hearing their answers, Suimei closed his eyes like he came to an understanding.

“What was the meaning... of that question?”

“Don’t worry about it. It isn’t something all that important... Well then, shall we move on to the explanation of dark magic?”

As he said this, Suimei switched tracks and dove right into explaining.

“Now then, I said before that the origin of the power behind dark magic was resentment and hatred, remember?”

“Yes. Though at the time... it wasn’t something... I would suddenly believe.”

“But there’s no mistaking it. I can tell from the loss to my astral body as well as the alterations to your skin and eye.”

After Suimei explained this like a preface of things to come, he hung his head for a short while like he was thinking of something. Perhaps he was putting together his explanation. But before long, he began talking.

“Well, we’ll be going off track a little, but I think we’ll start by talking about my analysis of this world’s magic. I believe the magic of this world is, in short, something that can be used because of the concept known as the Elements, which surrounds the world itself.”

“Surrounds... the world?”

“Yeah, try imagining the shape of this world, be it a sphere, a curved saddle, or even a flat plane. It doesn’t really matter... A wide concept known as the Elements exists outside of it and envelops the world. Within it are the smaller concepts of fire, water, and the other named Elements. The mages of this world send mana there, and receive an attribute and a part of the spell from the Elements.

It's that kind of system—they receive a formula... Well, I don't think the people who use it are conscious of that though."

"Certainly, over here it is normal. They teach you that magic is something that is used by communicating with the Elements. There is no detailed explanation like that."

"Seems so, huh?"

Suimei nodded at Felmenia's interjection. If they had gone into such details, they should have been able to establish just what dark magic was as common knowledge.

"The pluses and minuses aren't something that really need to be explored in detail at this point, but a portion of the spell becomes unknown, and the user becomes unable to grasp the technique itself. These are the two negatives. However, in general, it is a largely convenient formula. So next, dark magic draws out the deep resentment mixed in within that wide concept as power."

Liliana knit her brow at this crazy conversation.

"Please... wait. Why is that kind of thing... mixed in within the Elements?"

"I'm also having trouble understanding this. Suimei-kun just said that magic is something used by communicating with the Elements. So how does that kind of thing end up being related to magic?"

"With regards to that, it was the intent of the people who created this magic system in the first place. I'll start by answering Liliana's question."

The two girls nodded.

"In short, that thing known as hatred... As long as there are humans, it will exist. It's something that never disappears. No matter who it is, they cannot completely cast aside hatred and jealousy. Obviously, as the number of humans increase, so too do those feelings. Just like that, it simply multiplies without end, and eventually, it will completely fill up the shell known as the world."

"Just what happens when that occurs?"

"What happens, huh...? In my world, it has already happened. As science and medical technology remarkably advanced, the number of people increased far too quickly. That pent-up resentment that could not be held on to accumulated all over the world. It all turned into occurrences of nothing but ridiculous phenomena. To put it simply, when that kind of thing accumulates, the world will become strange."

Suimei looked at the girls and punctuated his statement by adding, “That’s how it is.”

The girls waited patiently for the rest of his explanation, still trying to decipher his words.

“Removing the abnormalities in one’s body is something anybody wants to do. That applies even to the larger concept known as a world. That’s why the world is always ejecting it outwards. I figure that what gets ejected ends up stopping in the place where the things known as the Elements reside, and begins to accumulate.”

“However, Suimei-dono, I believe that in that case, would it not be a similar power to the Elements?”

“But magic exists even without the Elements. As long as one follows the proper process, they can create the technique that is the origin of its power.”

“Ah...”

“When the very first person created the notion of magic in this world, just how did they have knowledge about the Elements? We’ll exclude that from the explanation from here. That unknown person first carefully split the wide concept known as the Elements one by one into smaller concepts like fire, water, and wind. If it was something like that, I believe that the limited power that could possibly be hailed is the reason why there are not many complex processes to using magic here. And then, while in the middle of splitting the concept up into categories, they found the thing that they called the power of darkness. That was hatred and resentment. When it manifested as power, it was black and repulsive. That kind of thing is often associated with the darkness of the night. Surely that person also thought the same and connected the two. I don’t know whether or not they were seized by the charm of such a strong power, but there’s no real doubt that they touched upon it.”

“...So what you’re saying, Suimei-kun, is that because the first person to give birth to magic here mistook the power of hatred and resentment as the Elements, dark magic was created?”

“That’s about it.”

“That is the true form... of the power I’ve been using?”

Liliana spoke with downcast eyes, but Suimei replied with an affirmative nod. Her eyes then seemed to waver.

“Then, that ominous being... What was it?”

She was gripping the covers on the bed tightly with a

frightened face as she recalled the strange creature they'd seen that night.

"The sinful figure, right? It was something mysticology refers to as a sinister being. It's a coagulation of refined malice. At the time that it reaches the density of an astrosus, the concept called the faceless in the astral plane is then projected into the world as the sinful figure, and it manifests like that."

On that evening, when Liliana's dark magic went berserk, her pent-up resentment had become quite pronounced. So much so that it manifested. At that time, when Liliana was no longer able to move, it was because of the sinful figure. Commonly referred to as spirits of the deceased, these wicked spirits take one of three forms. The most common, well known case was the possession of the target. The second was half-possession, like when Suimei used the sacred guardian angel when striking Rajas with abracadabra. And the third was the kind that tormented Liliana on that evening, the state known as obsession that brought the mystical being into the physical world. When exposed to the effects of an evil existence in the physical world, the spirit will weaken. Suimei explained up to this point, but...

"...Somehow, suddenly, it's become quite difficult to understand."

"...When Suimei-dono starts passionately explaining something, he starts using many difficult words, after all."

"...When he first starts, he explains everything simply with easy to understand comparisons though. Once he gets like this, it's hopeless."

Suimei was so absorbed in his explanation that he didn't even hear the three of them whispering to each other. And before long, he'd finished his entire mini-lesson from start to end.

"That's how it is."

"Somehow or other, I understand."

Suimei nodded like he was satisfied, and after a short pause, looked over at Liliana. It was an earnest gaze without a single hint of joking around. In response to that, Liliana straightened out her posture and faced him.

"If I teach you the foundations of magicka, you'll be able to learn techniques to not get taken by the darkness. If you learn that, the portions of your body and heart that are suffering from the darkness will also get better. How about it?"

As she heard his question, Liliana unconsciously opened her mouth. She was likely about to ask, “Why would you go so far for me?” But then she gave up, recalling that Suimei said he was a busybody.

“Understood. I’ll be… in your care.”

Liliana once more took Suimei’s outstretched hand into her own. And that was how Suimei’s party gained another new companion.

Chapter 3: Twilight, Dance

As the time for the parade for the Holy State El Meide's summoned hero, Elliot Austin, drew closer, the imperial capital became unusually crowded. The people of the city were bustling with excitement day in and day out, all hoping for the chance to catch a glimpse of the supposedly gorgeous hero. Tourists from both within and outside the Empire were pouring into the imperial capital. The population swelled so drastically that the inns in the city weren't enough to accommodate everyone. Even the cheap lodgings on the outskirts of the city were filled to capacity.

Thanks to the large crowds, local business was booming. The shops lining the streets were all specially decorated for the occasion. The extra touches made the streets of the imperial capital appear even more glamorous than usual. And with things so crowded and busy, it wasn't unusual for new shops to spring up overnight if you looked away at the right time.

The ones recruited to build these impromptu shops were not only the carpenters, but also the dwarves. Feeling especially motivated, the craftsmen in town were putting up stores, doing various carpentry, and creating weapons for warriors inspired by the hero summoning. Everyone had been hard at work for the past few days with practically no rest.

Even the citizens who treated their businesses like pastimes were working diligently now. It was as if they had all forgotten about the coma incidents. What helped, certainly, was the fact that there hadn't been any more incidents lately.

But nevertheless, on this particular day in the especially crowded imperial capital, Lefille was out and about on her own. Going out to play like a small child... was obviously not the reason for this; she had gone out to go shopping. After the episode Suimei and the others had had with Graziella in the plaza, they were hesitant to show their faces too openly in public. Therefore, gathering information and buying foodstuffs for the household became her responsibilities.

It wasn't like the military police were coming over to search or apprehend Suimei and the others, but they decided to play things on the safe side at least until the residual excitement of it all had cooled down an appropriate amount. After stuffing groceries and other goods into her bag, she picked it up and pushed through the crowd of people. Finding it harsh to move around while being jostled by so many passersby, she took refuge in an alleyway to catch her breath.

"Phew..."

Setting down her bag for a moment, she rolled her shoulders and stretched her back. After checking to make sure that her favorite frilly dress that she'd bought in Kurant City was unmarred, she gave the ribbon holding up her red hair a swift tug to tighten it up. She then looked back out at the teeming crowd of people still pushing and shoving each other with her blue eyes.

The situation that she and the others found themselves in recently had suddenly changed. It was all quite bewildering. There was the Goddess's oracle, Suimei's serious injuries from trying to talk to Liliana, even more injuries from fighting with Graziella, and now, on top of everything else, they'd even taken Liliana in.

"It must all be troublesome to Suimei-kun too..."

Even if she told him not to push himself, he would act without restraint until the bitter end. Claiming it was something that he must do, he would forge on down the difficult path that lay ahead. However, be that as it may, it could be said that his personality was good for all of them. Because he was just that sort of person, Lefille was able to go out like this after all. Even though she should have been letting out a sigh, she realized her face was frozen with consternation.

"There sure are a lot of people out, huh?"

It was about time for her to get moving. She picked up her bag and set off down the alley. She took a brief look back towards the bustling street. After walking a ways, she could no longer see the crowd on the street, but the din of the hustle and bustle still reached her. Just the thought of having to enter a crowd like that again was unpleasant. And so, deciding it would be better to take the side roads the rest of the way, she took the next turn and bumped into someone.

"Whoops, I'm terribly sorry."

"N-No, it's fine, girly."

As she immediately apologized, a man's voice came down from above in reply. He was speaking softly, but Lefille could hear excitement—or rather restlessness—in his tone. When she looked up, she could sense the air of completely irrepressible joy about him. A forced smile crawled over her face. She felt an unfamiliar shiver creep up her spine and stepped back, but then got a hold of herself and resolved to press onward.

"...Excuse me, but could you perhaps move out of the way?"

"Sorry, but I can't exactly do that."

"What? What do you mean you can't exactly do that? What... What are you—?!"

Lefille let out a reproachful shout at the actions of the man in front her. Not only was he blocking her way, he was now moving his hands in a revolting manner. They were such unpleasant movements that she felt like she could hear them creaking.

"Eheh, eheheh... Why don't you come and play with your big brother here?"

"Big brother...? In what way are you a big brother?! Aren't you more like an uncle?!"

"No way. I'm only in my late thirties."

"That age bracket most certainly qualifies as uncle territory!"

Lefille jumped backwards.

"Now, why don't you come over here and play with big brother? Guheheheh..."

The look in the man's eyes wasn't normal. He must have been the pedophile that had been the subject of the rumors floating around the imperial capital recently.

Ugh... What should I do? This is bad...

If she were in her original form, it would have been simple. But escaping from the crowd had been a mistake. To think that there was something even more dangerous than that milling mass of people in a place like this... If she screamed, would someone notice? Now that she was fairly deep into the back alleys, the odds of anyone hearing her scream over all the commotion on the street was quite low. But it was better than doing nothing. While she was contemplating her options, the man sidled up closer.

"Stop! Don't come any closer!"

"Eheh, eheh... Come on now. Don't be shy..."

Now that it had come to this, she had no choice but to throw her bag at him and use it as a distraction to escape. Internally

cursing the small figure she now inhabited, she took a stance and got ready to throw...

"Wait!"

At just the right time, a ferocious voice resounded in the air.

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From the sea of people not unlike the crowds at a theme park on a holiday, Mizuki barely managed to slip away. She stood there with both hands on her knees, catching her breath. Then, while wiping the sweat from her brow, she let out an irritated complaint.

"Th-There's sooooo many people!"

Behind her were the figures of Reiji and the others being jostled by the crowd and sweating from the stuffy air. Reiji let out a few feeble words of agreement, and Titania took a seat on a convenient wooden crate and began wiping her brow with a handkerchief she received from her knight escort.

Reiji's party had just today reached the imperial capital, and the cause of their panting and exasperation was the flood of people who'd also just arrived in the imperial capital. The city was stifling. Tourists, merchants, followers of the Church of Salvation, and all manner of other visitors had packed the streets. There was hardly anywhere for them to stand, much less take a break. Amid the explosion of colors assaulting Reiji's eyes, Mizuki's long, black hair was a rather calming sight.

Blocking the sunlight beaming down on them with his hand, Reiji managed to shade his eyes as he peered up into the cloudless sky. Up until arriving at the capital, he'd been delighted with the great weather, but he now found it rather detestable. He caught a flash of blue hair come into his field of vision from the corner of his eye. And before he knew it, Titania began speaking to the fed-up Mizuki.

"This is probably the result of the parade for the hero summoned by the Holy State, no?"

"If I remember right, the parade still isn't for a few days, right? What on earth will this place be like the day of...?"

Hearing Mizuki's words, everyone's faces filled with dread. No one wanted to think about it. The sea of people was one thing, but there was a much more serious problem looming over them.

"In the end, we couldn't find any lodgings, huh?"

“I know, right...? Aaah, what to do?”

“If we courteously ask the Church of Salvation, I believe they should welcome us... Reiji-sama is a hero, after all.”

“Yeah, we’ve always got that card to play! Nice idea, Tia!”

Mizuki was delightedly sticking her thumb up in approval of Titania’s suggestion. Reiji, however, shook his head.

“Let’s not.”

“What? Wh-Why not? What’s wrong, Reiji-kun?”

“If we use my name like that, the whole imperial capital will find out that we’re here. I don’t think we’d be able to move very freely after that.”

“Certainly, I cannot deny the possibility that the followers of the Church of Salvation would spread the word. If we walked around in the middle of the city, I am sure we would be instantly swarmed. And just like the hero from the Holy State, they would probably insist on holding a parade for us as well. Regardless, if it comes to a matter of taking alms or not, perhaps we should refrain. There are quite a few of us, after all.”

“I’m not so sure about receiving alms either.”

Reiji agreed with the princess on that matter. But in terms of making their presence known to the public, there was the danger that they would no longer be able to take action within the Empire. After all, the people believed that Reiji was responsible for defeating Rajas. Thanks to word spreading in Kurant City, Reiji and his party were forced to stay holed up in the inn most of the time. Recalling that, it wasn’t hard to imagine the same thing happening here.

Moreover, the reason they’d come to the Empire was to check on Graziella’s movements. There would be some benefits to making themselves known, but for the time being, they at least needed to act in accordance with Hadorious’s instructions. Reiji was also personally interested in Graziella as well.

“Uuugh... Then are we gonna camp outside? We finally made it to a big city. I don’t wanna camp...”

Mizuki wasn’t being selfish, but she was being unusually whiny. During their travels, they hadn’t actually made camp all that often. When they did, it was only when there was no other option for accommodations. Reiji could understand how she felt. After coming to such a grand city, being forced to camp outside wasn’t exactly something he wanted to do either.

“Certainly, resting without a proper place to sleep isn’t good for your health. I think it would be best if we could secure some lodgings.”

“I know, right? But what are we gonna do?”

Both their rest and their duties were important. However, in this situation, they didn’t have a solution for fulfilling either one.

“Why don’t we try a different district? Perhaps over there...”

As Mizuki suggested moving to a different part of town, the senior knight—Gregory—grimaced in a stiff expression.

“No, Mizuki-dono, that will not do. Even if there was lodgings available outside of the main district, such cheap accommodations would be cruder than camping outside. It would be somewhat unhealthy for Mizuki-dono and Her Royal Highness.”

“I-Is that so...?”

All Mizuki really heard from Gregory’s stern rejection was one thing: Dad said no. Feeling somewhat discouraged and hopeless, Mizuki nodded with resignation and shrank back. As she did, the younger knight named Roffrey spoke up.

“If we search around the district, I think we’ll at least be able to find a place for Her Royal Highness, Reiji-dono, and Mizuki-dono.”

“Just us three? Then where will you and the others stay...?”

“There is no need to worry about us, my lady. Our top priorities are you, the hero, and the princess.”

Backing up Roffrey, Luka added her two cents. But even then, Reiji had a hard time accepting it.

“Hmm... Maybe it would be best to just grin and bear it, and go to the church after all.”

As the group was putting their heads together and racking their brains about what to do next, they were suddenly interrupted by the screams of a young girl from nearby.

“Stop! Don’t come any closer!”

Everyone looked up and glanced at each other.

“Reiji-sama...”

“It sounded close. Let’s go take a look.”

Taking the lead, Reiji headed towards the sound of the voice. He caught a whiff of danger in the air. Turning the corner into the alley, he saw a strange man cornering a little girl.

“R-Reiji-kun, that...”

“Yeah, I got it.”

Reiji judged what was going on in an instant, and went to stop

the man. Watching Reiji run off with a dignified expression, Titania's face flushed red.

"As expected of Reiji-sama... Mizuki, did you see it? That gallant face that brooks no evil?"

"I'm used to seeing that part of Reiji-kun."

Mizuki stuck her chest out with a proud smile. Titania bitterly pursed her lips, the jealousy written on her face.

"How unfair..."

Meanwhile, Reiji had already cut in between the man and the little girl.

"Wh-What's with you?!"

"You don't need to know anything about me. That's none of your concern. Get away from this child right now. If you don't..."

As he spoke, Reiji sharpened his gaze and overpoweringly stared down the man in front of him. He let out a pitiful squeal, but just to be doubly sure, Reiji began to draw his sword from its sheathe.

"E-EEEEEK!"

Before Reiji, who had fought both demons and monsters in this world, there was no way this man who seemed to be planning to kidnap a small girl would be able to make a stand. With incredible speed, he turned tail and ran as fast as his legs would carry him.

"Good grief. For an adult to do such things..."

Reiji let out a sigh as he lamented the man's behavior. When he turned around, the little girl bowed to him.

"Thank you for saving me."

"Don't mention it. It was nothing. But are you alright? Did he do anything to you?"

"I'm fine. After I screamed, you came right away."

Reiji had a brief exchange with the little girl. Her appearance was striking. She had beautiful, neatly combed back red hair, and two moles lined up under her eye. She was cute enough that Reiji could almost understand why the man wanted to kidnap her. However, upon taking a closer look, her bearing and demeanor gave off a very dignified impression. While Reiji was thinking of such things, the girl casually looked off in the direction the man had run.

"I'm glad that you saved me and all, but was the manner in which you drove him away not a little too aggressive?"

"I'll go ahead and entertain your strange problem: when things

become that odd, being a little aggressive is the best option."

"I see... That's true, isn't it?"

She seemed to be convinced. People like that weren't worth wasting words on. Trying to resolve things peacefully might even make the situation worse. As they talked, Mizuki and the others then finally caught up to Reiji and approached from behind.

"Those kinds of people exist everywhere, huh...?"

"In this world, they are what we call pedophiles. Do they exist in your world as well?"

"Yeah, you hear about them in the news every now and then after they've been arrested."

Reiji could hear Mizuki and Titania discussing the details behind him. But his attention was focused on the girl in front of him, who then politely introduced herself.

"My name is Lefille Grakis. Allow me to thank you once more. If it's alright with you, might I know your name?"

"I'm not really someone worth remembering... would be a little pompous to say, huh? My name is Reiji Shana."

When Reiji named himself, Lefille knit her brows together.

"Sir Reiji, right? You wouldn't happen to be... the one Suimei-kun knows, would you?"

"Huh?"

"What?"

"Suimei, as in... You know Suimei?!"

Lefille nodded at Reiji's question. The two girls who'd also heard her question poked their heads out from behind either side of Reiji.

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After the dangerous encounter with the pervert, Lefille was now headed back to base with Reiji and company in tow. After finding out that they were Suimei's acquaintances, she was guiding them back to their house.

"So you came to the Empire together with Suimei, Lefille-chan?"

"Hmph... I'm not very happy about having '-chan' applied to my name, but... Well, whatever. Yes, that's how it happened."

"Huh? But Lefille-chan, weren't there a lot of demons in the area at the time?"

Faced with Mizuki's suspicions, Lefille was forced to come up with a plausible story.

"Y-Yes, well, we got lucky in slipping past them. After escaping past Kurant City, we came to Nelferia."

"I see. We might have just nearly missed each other somewhere, huh?"

"Indeed, we never thought of checking the visitor registry there. We all thought that Suimei hadn't made it to Kurant City yet. What a blind spot."

Titania was troubled at their oversight. In contrast, Mizuki—now that the major anxiety she'd been carrying with her all this time had been blown away—was smiling brightly and breathed a sigh of relief.

"But thank god Suimei-kun is safe."

"Yeah, really. As usual, he has the devil's luck in getting out of whatever trouble he gets himself into..."

"Seriously, though... After all that 'I don't want anything to do with danger' stuff, what is he doing?"

"But isn't that how he always is? He always complains at first, but one way or another, he always ends up sticking his neck into it."

"Yeah, you're right."

Reiji and Mizuki were cheerfully chatting away about their friend, who they were both truly grateful to hear was alright. Lefille smiled, as she had a very good understanding of what they were talking about.

"From what I've heard, I imagined you were all very close friends. It seems I was right."

"I've known Suimei-kun for about four years, but for Reiji-kun, it's been five or six, right?"

It was only a couple years' difference. Both of them were close enough to call childhood friends. As they continued to talk about Suimei—how much of a softhearted tsundere he was, how he was always acting cool, how he always ended up the comedian, and all manner of other things—they finally arrived at their destination.

"Here we are. This is it."

As they came around the corner, a familiar back-alley dead end came into view for Lefille. It used to be a filthy place polluted by an ever-present stink in the air. But after Suimei used some incomprehensible cleaning method, it was neat and clean now.

“So he’s living in a place like this, huh? Coming down this alleyway, I must say I was expecting something musty. This is a pleasant surprise.”

“How pretty. I was dead sure it would have a much more quaint and boring vibe, you know?”

Titania and Mizuki were both wide-eyed at the obvious disparity in the scenery compared to other places in the area. The dark, gloomy, dirty atmosphere had taken a sudden change for the bright. Part of it was because Suimei had put a thick, fresh coat of plaster on everything. He kept saying that all the houses in the area were too filthy, that it kept him from being in a good mood. It seemed he’d even cast magicka on the tables and chairs that were left outside so that they wouldn’t get moldy. He was of the belief that the place he called home would have to be taken care of the way he wanted, or else he wouldn’t be satisfied. And it was this place that they approached now. Lefille walked up to it and opened the front door.

“I’m back.”

As she did, an apron-wearing Felmenia came over to greet her.

“Lefille, welcome back—Oh?”

The expression on her face was exactly what one would expect from someone who’d just been thoroughly surprised. As she looked at each and every person behind Lefille, she froze on the spot. Reiji and the others felt much the same way. After an unnatural pause, it was Titania who raised her voice.

“White Flame-dono?!”

“Y-Your Highness and Hero-dono and Mizuki-dono?! Why are you...”

Just as she was about to question what was going on, Felmenia suddenly came to her senses. “Oh crap” was all that flashed through her mind. She immediately took the apron she was wearing and tossed it aside violently. Without verifying where it flew off to behind her, she turned to the full-length mirror installed in the entranceway. She checked her hair, the braids draped down beside her ears, her face, and all manner of other things with quick and agile movements. After taking up the same serious and cool expression she always had at Camellia, she bowed to the guests.

“I mean... It has been too long, everyone.”

After bowing deeply and long enough to properly show her respect to her superiors, Felmenia raised her head and met Lefille’s

gaze.

"Lefille, why are you together with Her Royal Highness's party?"

"They saved me after I got into a quarrel with a strange man. When I asked for their names, I thought they sounded familiar... And now here we are."

A coincidence. And a rather remarkable one at that. Felmenia still looked quite surprised. Reiji then turned the question on her.

"Sensei, why are you here? I thought you were acting under the direct orders of King Almadious?"

"Um... That is true. Let us talk about the finer details inside."

As she urged them to enter, a listless voice called from inside.

"Hey, do we have a guest?"

Suimei's figure then appeared in the entranceway. When he spotted Reiji and the others behind Felmenia, he scowled with an expression like he'd seen a ghost.

"Huh...?"

The three of them called out to him as he stood there in his own world.

"Long time no see, Suimei."

"Heyo, Suimei-kun!"

"It has been quite some time, Suimei."

"HUUUUUUUUUUH?!"

★

With the surprise reunion with Reiji's group, Suimei invited them all to the living room after he collected himself. Considering the number of people, however, not all of them could comfortably fit around the table. Reiji, Mizuki, and Titania took their places at the table while the knights sat on chairs behind them. Since Titania was there, Felmenia hesitated to sit at the same table as the princess, and instead chose to stand behind Suimei. Lefille was uneasy about the arrival of so many people and was hiding next to her. As for Liliana, she was sitting on the sofa. Suimei was still completely baffled at this sudden visit, and looked at everyone one by one before speaking up.

"Man, to think that Reiji would save Lefi..."

"I could say the same. I never imagined that Lefille-chan would be your acquaintance."

“I bet, huh? Fate is a mysterious thing, you know.”

As Mizuki cut in, Suimei’s lips curled into an impish smirk.

“What? Not, ‘Oh, this must be the guidance of the stars’?”

“Jeez! How can you be so mean right after we get here?!”

Mizuki infuriatedly puffed out her cheeks over Suimei intentionally bringing up her past. Suimei and Reiji both smiled at her charming reaction. Of course, all of this was either meaningless, incomprehensible, or simply strange to everyone else. Titania, who was sitting next to Reiji, turned to Felmenia who was still standing behind Suimei.

“I was concerned about what happened to you after you departed Kurant City, but it seems your duty concerned Suimei. Is that so, White Flame-dono?”

“Yes. On His Majesty’s orders, I have entrusted my humble abilities to Suimei-dono.”

“As expected, White Flame-dono has a strong sense of responsibility, I see.”

“What? Ah, no, it’s nothing so...”

“Again with the humility. In order to take responsibility for summoning Suimei, did my father not request that the White Flame herself support him? If that was not the case, you would not have traveled through danger all the way to the Empire, now would you?”

As Titania came to her conclusion, Reiji nodded in agreement. He looked proud of his teacher and her dedication, but surely he was reading too much into it and overreacting.

“At the time, I was certain that you were on your way to meet the man who destroyed that army of demons, but... It seems my prediction was inaccurate.”

That wasn’t true. But there was no way anyone could tell her that. Catching a glimpse of Titania’s keen intuition, however, Felmenia and Lefille both looked a little nervous.

“Why are you in the Empire anyway, Suimei?”

“I’m looking for a way to return. So I went on a journey of my own.”

“I see. So that’s why you left the castle. What happened from there?”

“I believe you already know, but I traveled together with Lefi and a trade corps. Partway here, we ended up in a little bit of trouble with the guys in the trade corps and split up with them, but

we cut through the forest and came out at Kurant City."

"Then... the demons?"

"Well, we came across them a little. One thing led to another, and we ended up living together..."

Just like that, with a shady smile and a strangely self-satisfied air of confidence, Suimei laid out a plausible story. Reiji and the others listening seemed like they bought it, too. However, Mizuki didn't miss her chance to throw in a quip.

"One thing led to another and you ended up living together with a cute little girl? What does that even mean, Suimei-kun?"

"Oh, and that's when Menia showed up and started teaching me magic."

"Suimei-kun just casually ignored me..."

Pretending not to see Mizuki shooting daggers at him, Suimei glibly lined up his story. Felmenia and Lefille, who were listening in on the conversation behind him, both made somewhat disgusted expressions as they whispered to each other in secret.

"He really can just calmly spout such lies..."

"You could seriously say he's become just a little evil. And that's not a compliment."

Naturally, they were in awe, and not particularly in a pleasant way. Without the slightest hint on his face, Suimei was casually feeding his friends lies like it was all a matter of fact. Of course they were astonished. Knowing the circumstances, they could only see it as shameless, though his friends believed him unhesitatingly. They had to wonder if this was its own kind of magicka. But as their conversation came to an end, Reiji shifted his attention to Liliana, who was quietly sitting on the sofa on the other side of the room.

"Now that I think about, who is that kid over there?"

Suimei turned his head around like he was worried.

"That's... Well, there were special circumstances."

It was hard to talk about it, but he had tell them. It was quite the dilemma. As all eyes fell on her, Liliana stood up and humbly lowered her head.

"My name is Liliana Zandyke."

"Liliana-chan, hmm? Wait, isn't Liliana Zandyke..."

It seemed that Reiji had heard her name before. He looked up the ceiling and began to poke around his memories to try and recall where. Even in the noisy conversational melting pot of the city streets, talk of the manhunt still seemed to be fluttering around.

Perhaps as one would expect, Titania also knew the famous name.

"One of the Empire's Elite Twelve. Right now, she should be on the city's wanted list."

"That's it! Now that I think of it, didn't we hear that she was the culprit behind some kind of incident?!"

"...Didn't I just say that there were special circumstances?"

Suimei let out a sigh as he exaggeratedly shrugged his shoulders, and then began to give Reiji and the others a summary of what had happened.

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"I see..."

"That's pretty complicated, huh?"

Hearing Suimei's rundown of the incidents and Liliana's circumstances, Reiji and Mizuki looked at her full of pity at first, but ultimately ended up sighing by the end of the story. Suimei looked at Lefille cuddling up to Liliana and gently stroking her hair as he quietly nodded his head. Perhaps because of her parting with Rogue, Lefille had been trying to cheer Liliana up ever since she came to the house. Suimei didn't want to do or say anything that would weigh too heavily on her heart, but he'd had to explain. And as his story came to an end, Reiji looked at him with a very serious expression.

"So what do you plan to do with Liliana-chan?"

"Hmm? Oh, I'll be sheltering her here."

"But that won't resolve anything, will it?"

"That's right. That's why our other goal is to find the real culprit and apprehend them. After that, we can just explain the situation and hand them over."

"That may be so, but won't the people of the Empire demand you hand over Liliana-chan too?"

"Odds are eight or nine out of ten, yeah."

Suimei agreed with Reiji's assessment. Even if she'd been controlled, it did not change the fact that she had performed the act. It wasn't difficult to imagine that the people demanding Liliana be handed over was in their future. But as long as he was taking care of her, there was no way Suimei would do so quietly.

"Well, if it comes to that, should we all just flee to a different country?"

In this world, if they made it past the border, it was likely no one from the Empire would be able to pursue them. It made fleeing to a different country a viable option. As he suggested it, Suimei smiled at both Lefille and Felmenia. Felmenia quietly nodded. And after a brief pause of surprise, Lefille flashed a daring smile.

"You really are an impulsive person."

Liliana then stood up, her face paling.

"B-But, that's..."

She bore an anxious expression, one that indicated she had no wish to cause trouble for others. But before she could finish raising an objection, Suimei let out a cheerful laugh.

"I don't mind at all, you know. But if everyone is against it, I'll think of another hand to play."

"I am here for the sake of supporting Suimei-dono. I will abide by whatever intentions Suimei-dono has."

"Same for me. Life in the Empire is good, but I will accompany Suimei-kun wherever he goes."

"See? Not a problem."

Even as Suimei smiled at Liliana, telling her that she needn't worry, it did nothing to abate her melancholy. However, it was already decided. She had no choice but to resign herself. As they came to that conclusion, Suimei turned his head.

"So that's how it is."

"Duly noted."

Reiji closed his eyes and nodded. Mizuki smiled wryly like she was watching over a troublesome best friend.

"You're just as softhearted as Reiji-kun, aren't you, Suimei-kun?"

"What? Don't put me in the same category as this guy, Mizuki. I'm not really softhearted or anything..."

"Oh yeah? Despite saying you shunned the idea of danger and refusing to come along with us, who's the young imbecile that's sticking his neck out for all this mess, huh?"

"G-Gee, I wonder..."

Even though he played dumb, everyone's eyes were focused on him.

"Okay, fine! Yeah, it's me! Sorry 'bout that!"

The fact that he was caught between bashfulness and anger was courtesy of the attack coming at him from all sides. Suimei raised his voice in a modest attempt to hide his embarrassment. It was

meager resistance, but it was all he could offer against Mizuki's pinpoint counterattack. For Suimei, this was the first time he'd ever found himself in a situation like lying on a bed of nails. Clearing his throat in an attempt to clear the air, he changed the topic.

"Aaanyways, what are you guys doing in the imperial capital? If I remember correctly, you said you were headed to the self-governed state, right?"

"...Regarding that, we have some special circumstances of our own."

Reiji smiled bitterly. As if being weighed down by his anguish, the atmosphere around him was heavy. Titania continued in his stead.

"Suimei, do you know about Duke Hadorious?"

"Yeah, I heard about him from Menia."

"About how he's the man who ensnared us, you mean?" Lefille asked in a sharp tone.

As expected, the flames of rage were still burning brightly deep within that small body of hers. Her indignant voice made no concessions on the subject. As Titania bowed down to apologize, Suimei stopped her with his hand and shook his head. Everyone was likely thinking the same thing—it wasn't her fault.

"We were told by His Grace to come to the imperial capital and check up on Her Imperial Highness Graziella's movement."

Hearing that name from Reiji's mouth, one of Suimei's eyebrows shot up.

"You mean Graziella, as in... *her*?"

"Suimei-kun, you know her?"

Suimei answered Mizuki's question with something of a bitter expression.

"Weeeeell, a little... Anyways, setting that aside, why do you have to listen to what this duke guy tells you to do? As a hero, can't you just veto it?"

At Castle Camellia, even King Almadious treated Reiji with respect. And when Graziella had been rude to Elliot, Graziella's attendant had looked mortified. It seemed the prestige and authority of the hero was far beyond that of any single noble.

"He took a family member hostage and threatened us."

"Family member?"

Suimei was wondering just who that referred to. It was impossible that they'd gotten their hands on Reiji's family. They

were in another world, after all. As Suimei was making a puzzled frown, one of the knights who had been sitting behind Reiji and the others, Gregory, stood up from his seat and bowed down his head apologetically. Grasping the situation from that, Suimei leaned slackly back into his chair and spoke up in astonishment.

"What's with that? That guy really is an unbelievable asshole, isn't he? Good grief... Looks like I'll have to go and slug him sooner rather than later, huh?"

If they just left Hadorious to his own devices, there was no telling what he would do. It seemed it was necessary to find a chance to make contact with him. Hearing Suimei's statement, Reiji's expression grew serious.

"Suimei, Duke Hadorious is strong. He was able to catch and stop my fist."

"So what? What am I supposed to make of that?"

"Do you think you could stop my punch as I am now, Suimei?"

As Suimei was poking fun at Reiji, Reiji grinned and formed a fist like he was going to send him flying along with his joke. In response, Suimei raised both his hands.

"I'm a pacifist. I'm against violence."

"...You sure can talk. Despite the fact that you're surprisingly merciless."

Reiji's unamused gaze pierced through Suimei's shamelessness. Shrugging his shoulders as if he didn't know what Reiji was talking about, he let out one more exasperated sigh. Moving on, Suimei turned serious as he closed his eyes and began thinking.

"At any rate... Graziella, huh? Just why would some bigshot noble force you to do something like that?"

"With regards to that, we're pretty in the dark ourselves."

Reiji shook his head. The doleful look on his face told Suimei just how much distress this put him through on their journey. Seeing it, Suimei put together what he'd heard of the story and gave his assessment without any prompting.

"Somehow, it feels like he wanted you to head towards the imperial capital."

"Wanted me to head to the imperial capital? But there shouldn't be any demons in the Empire..."

"That's exactly why. This kind of place has nothing to do with the hero's job. On top of that, it's not like you're here to raise the spirits of the citizens of an allied country. There should be no

reason to make a hero come here, right? If he's as remarkable as you say he is, he should have as many subordinates and spies as he wants to send over. And if he was really that curious, they would already be here. From what I've heard, it sounds like this Hadorious guy was going out of his way to get you to come to this country by any means possible."

"Why, though?"

Suimei shut his eyes as he listened to Mizuki's frank question.

"Well... If he's taken a hostage and made threats, it must be something big, huh?"

"But Duke Hadorious only told us to check up on Princess Graziella's movements. He didn't tell us to do anything else...."

Reiji's expression became quite grim as he sank deeper into thought about what could possibly be going on. If it was just as Reiji said and Hadorious really only wanted Reiji to stalk Graziella, then Suimei could just deem Hadorious woefully incompetent. If this was only about checking up on her, then it wasn't worth incurring Reiji's enmity just to send him over to the Empire and make him take care of the job.

"Certainly, it is just as Duke Hadorious says. Lately Her Imperial Highness Graziella has been quite busy. Using her authority in the military, she's been taking very firm political measures towards neighboring countries, and quite often at that. As far as Astel is concerned, it's not a very good situation."

No one was about to tell Titania she was wrong, but Suimei couldn't just leave it at that. From the flow of the conversation, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something being implied in a roundabout way by Hadorious's actions.

"But when Princess Graziella invaded the border, Duke Hadorious didn't really have anything in particular to say about it then, right?"

"Aha, that's it!"

As if the answer had swooped down on him, Suimei snapped his fingers. The last fragment had fallen into place with Reiji's candid question.

"What do you mean, Suimei?"

"You said at the time that woman invaded the border, right? The imperial princess... How did she get to where you guys were?"

"How did she get there? Not the reason why she was there?"

"That's right. I'm talking about the way she physically got

there."

"That's... She said she took her troops and forcibly broke through."

"So she broke through that fortress on the national border without any trouble at all?"

Rather than Reiji, it was Felmenia who answered his question.

"Surely. From what I have seen of Her Imperial Highness and the troops under her command, it did not look like they had suffered any damage."

Felmenia was ruminating over her own words. After saying it, she seemed to be recalling the events in her head. As she thought it over, Lefille flashed a quizzical expression.

"That's certainly strange... When I was there with Suimei-kun, the fortress on the national border to Astel didn't look so frail that it could be overrun so easily."

"No, it certainly didn't, did it?"

Titania was of the same opinion. A flustered expression floated up on her face as she realized she hadn't thought about this before. The fortress on the national border was well built and well defended. Not only was there the ravine, but the fortress boasted an incredible iron gate. The times at which it opened and closed were predetermined, so it wasn't a simple matter to pass through forcefully. But taking Graziella's abilities into consideration, she was more than capable of bulldozing her way through. It wasn't hard to imagine her doing it. But if she *had* used her magic to do so, it was inevitable that it would have turned into a major uproar. There would have been serious damage to show for it, too. Yet no one had seen or heard anything.

"Besides, her timing was too good. I heard her arrival coincided exactly with the time the army from Kurant City was closing in on the demons, right?"

"Certainly, now that you mention it, that was the case, but... It's not an impossible coincidence, right?"

Reiji uttered those words of denial like his self-confidence was faltering. But Suimei shook his head and continued.

"At the point in time when the demons arrived in the country, the only ones who knew about it were the higher-ups in Astel and Gregory-san, who guided you guys away from them. And from what I've heard, the only ones who've encountered any demons were you guys, the lot from the trade corps, and us. The citizens of Astel were

not made aware of the presence of demons. So as far as the people of Astel are concerned, there are only demons outside the country. So in spite of all of that, how did someone from another country get their hands on that kind of information so easily?"

"Maybe they captured a demon within imperial territory and made it talk?"

"Impossible. Demons would never cooperate. They aren't that kind of being."

Lefille drew her conclusion in no time at all. She knew more about demons than anyone else; there was no way she was wrong about their behavior. And from what Suimei could remember of his encounters with them, he too knew that they were not the kind of beings who would reveal any information even if they were tortured. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if they self-destructed the moment they were captured. In that case, if Suimei had to guess...

"Hey, perhaps this Hadorious guy..."

Perhaps. That vague silhouette in Suimei's mind gradually began to take shape. Before his answer became clear enough that he could put it into words, Titania took a stab at it.

"...Leaked the information, allowed Her Imperial Highness Graziella into the country, and schemed with the guards at the national border? Suimei, is this what you are implying?"

Suimei answered her with a nod. The tension in the air bound everyone in silence. Lagging behind a beat, Mizuki threw out a flustered question in a panic.

"B-But what does he have to gain from doing that kind of thing? Duke Hadorious is a noble of Astel, you know? Are you saying he's connected to Princess Graziella behind the scenes?"

"Who knows? I don't know whether they're connected or whether he simply leaked the information yet... Well, if it's that's the case, then it would be an easy excuse to start a war. That dangerous woman aggressively crossed the national border without permission, after all. If there was someone important in Astel who was holding a grudge against the Empire, it would be quite easy for them to prey on that. And then he immediately sent Reiji over after that."

"Do you think they're also being provoked?"

Reiji's expression had become quite strained. Suimei replied as though the answer was no surprise to him.

"He said himself it was only to check up on things, after all."

Certainly, Graziella's actions in pushing through the border into Astel's territory may have been reasonable considering the situation. However, it would naturally make the leaders of Astel nervous. And if, right after it happened, Reiji made an unexpected visit to the Empire, that nervousness would double instantly.

"However, Suimei, there should be no reason right now for Astel to declare war on the Empire."

"Right? That's also the point I don't quite get."

That was where Suimei had to throw his hands up in the air with a troubled groan. With demons invading human territories, there was no benefit to be wrought from causing a falling out between nations. Felmenia and Titania were also both in agreement on this matter.

"Even if we're talking about Duke Hadorious, he should fully understand the menace of the demon threat. Besides, just from leaking information on them, it would be uncertain that the leaders of the Empire would make a move."

"That's true. There are too many variables for it to be that kind of scheme, huh...?"

As they were discussing this, Reiji began to stir.

"But..."

"Is there something on your mind, Reiji?"

"No, it's just... If it's as Suimei suspects, I was just thinking that Duke Hadorious's attitude at that time might make sense."

"You mean about how quiet he was?"

"Yeah. If Princess Graziella's arrival was actually some setup by Duke Hadorious, then his silence at the time regarding her trespassing wraps itself up nicely. With his personality, he would have at least let fly one brutally honest remark under such circumstances... But, all in all, I don't think we're going to make any more progress on this topic."

"That's certainly true."

There wasn't enough material for them to make a proper judgment. There would be nothing better than quickly getting on top of whatever scheme was afoot while they could, but that was impossible under the current circumstances. All they could determine right now was that they needed to be vigilant in regards to Hadorious.

"So, switching gears, what are you guys going to do from here on?"

“Oh my gosh, Suimei-kun, listen to this! We couldn’t even find an inn!”

“Well, there’s that parade and all.”

Mizuki looked at Suimei imploringly, as if for advice or a solution, but he only looked back at her as if the present situation should have been a given. The inns were probably overbooked before they even arrived. Suimei leaned back in his chair as he pondering this.

“...Wanna stay here? With this many people, it’ll be pretty cramped though.”

“Suimei, is that really alright?”

“We don’t have enough beds for everyone, so the guys will have to sleep together in the living room.”

Reiji didn’t seem to have any objections. As he looked around the room to see if it was alright with everyone else, the female knight Luka spoke up.

“If that is the case, we will once more look for some lodgings. Even if we’re only able to secure a few rooms, we would be able to split up between the inns and Suimei-dono’s house.”

As Reiji acknowledged this, the knights all agreed and headed towards the front door. Reiji and Mizuki went to see them off, perhaps to once more show them gratitude for putting in so much work for them. Titania also stood up, but instead of following after Reiji, she approached Suimei.

“What’s up?”

Even though he asked her that, Titania came closer still. A gentle aroma tickled his nose. When she was within arm’s reach, she beckoned to Suimei. As he obediently leaned in, she brought her mouth closer to his ear to whisper to him privately.

“Suimei, would you be able to keep me company for a bit tomorrow?”

“Keep you company?”

“I have something to talk with you about. It is very important.”

Suimei leaned back again and looked at Titania’s face. Her deep blue eyes were looking straight at him earnestly; they reflected her seriousness. He guessed that she had a good reason for asking him.

“...Understood.”

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Thanks to the great efforts of their knight escorts, Reiji's group managed to secure rooms at an inn for three people. After splitting their party up between the Yakagi residence and the inn, it seemed that they no longer had to worry about accommodations for the time being. Reiji, Mizuki, and Titania would be staying at Suimei's place while the knights stayed in the inn. That evening, for the first time in a while, Suimei and Reiji were able to talk just between the guys. The girls also had their own girl talk late into the night while going nuts over something, though that was mostly Mizuki. Morning came early the next day.

"I'd gotten quite used to the air in Astel, but the Empire also has a nice wind blowing through it."

"Doesn't it?"

Suimei had gone out with Titania at her request. The two of them had left the Yakagi residence and were now outside the imperial capital to the northwest, stretching their legs on a verdant hill. Looking over the landscape, gently sloping waves of green stretched out before them. Every once in a while, a refreshing wind would brush gently against the back of Suimei's neck.

Standing in a slightly elevated place, Titania brushed her hair behind her ears, shut her eyes, and savored the breeze. Rather than the dress Suimei had seen her wear at the castle, she was now wearing clothes that were easier to move in with an overcoat draped over her outfit. Thanks to its high collar, he was unable to see her mouth from the side. If anybody saw her for the first time dressed like this outside the city, they would never imagine that she was a genuine princess.

Suimei had that sort of impression, but it was blown away in an instant. Titania suddenly stretched out both of her arms and spread them as wide as she could. She started to enjoy the air in the Empire in an entirely different way than before. Suimei guessed it was because she was freed from the stuffy air in the imperial capital, or perhaps it was because she didn't have to keep up appearances here.

From Suimei's perspective, her current behavior was more pleasant than usual.

Other than the one horse they'd rode there on, there wasn't a soul present except for Suimei and Titania. Titania hadn't mentioned this to either Reiji or Mizuki, and unexpectedly, the knight escorts didn't come along either. When Titania informed

Luka of her plans, she requested to accompany them, but Titania turned her down. In Suimei's case, he'd only told Felmenia and Lefille that he was going out. After a while, Titania seemed satisfied with the air on the hill, and turned around as she began talking.

"Thank you very much for the accommodations. To make sure we all had beds, you even gave up yours for us."

"I don't mind. All a guy really needs to sleep is enough room on the floor. That's good enough."

"Oho, is that so? Thanks to you, I was able to thoroughly enjoy my evening yesterday."

The tone of her voice was rather bright and carefree. As Titania gently smiled at him, Suimei casually shrugged his shoulders. Then a change came over her, and she spoke to Suimei like she was troubled about something.

"Did Liliana seem stiff to you?"

"Yeah. Seeing everyone gathered together, she was in a state where she didn't know what she should do. However, Lefille has been taking good care of her, so she shouldn't be all that uncomfortable. Besides, Mizuki also talked to her a bunch. I think she'll open her heart pretty soon."

"I see..."

Suimei carefully considered Liliana's situation for a moment. Even though it was temporary, her housemates had suddenly increased in number. It seemed to throw her off a bit. Naturally, due to her penchant for dark magic, she wasn't used to being around other people. In short, she was extremely shy around strangers. Suimei knew this, and it was precisely because of it that he was worried about her the other night. Somehow or other, however, it seemed things were working out.

Suimei was quite concerned about her, but a large portion of her care was left to Lefille and Felmenia. Part of it was because they were all girls, but one of their other goals was to use Lefille's spirit powers to expel the evil from Liliana's body. Suimei wasn't particularly worried about the situation, even after his other friends had shown up. They were all considerate people too.

"I wonder what Reiji-sama and Mizuki are doing now..."

"They said something about having Lefi show them around the imperial capital. It wasn't really necessary to give them a tour first thing, but she's a hard worker."

"Is she now?"

Titania giggled. Raising her hand to cover her mouth as she did, Suimei caught a glimpse of her elegance.

"So, it's about time I hear about this important thing you wanted to talk about, isn't it? You didn't bring any escorts and left the other two out of it. You must've had a reason for all that, right?"

"That is correct. We should be fine here."

In a complete change from her graceful smile, Titania's face became much more intense than before. As if she was looking for something she'd failed to notice, she scanned her surroundings. It didn't seem like she was wary of people in the area, however. And as she turned back towards Suimei, her expression was somehow cold and serious.

"Suimei. I have something I would like to request... No, that is not quite right. There is something I would have you do from here on out."

"That's sudden."

"I am aware that it is abrupt."

"You mean to say there's something you want from me, right?"

"Very nearly... But rather than want, it may be more appropriate to say that I would like to force you to do so."

Titania corrected herself while maintaining a calm attitude. She was putting on airs quite considerably... Or rather, she said such a thing after thinking about it carefully, in short...

"There's no real need to hold back. Just call it an order."

"Then, Suimei, return to Astel immediately."

Suimei had told her not to hold back, but he wasn't expecting her to fire off an order like that.

"...That really is abrupt, huh?"

"Indeed. However, I have a reason why I have no choice but to ask you to do so. I believe that is easy enough to understand, is it not?"

"Just in case, I'd like to hear it straight."

"It concerns Duke Hadorious."

It was just as Suimei expected. Somehow or other, he'd anticipated this.

"At this rate, you will become a shackle to Reiji-sama. That is why I'd have you return to the Kingdom immediately and stay by my father's side quietly. If the king himself makes a few arrangements for you, even if you return, you would not be treated

poorly. If you tell them what's going on and accept my father's protection, even a duke would have difficulty laying their hands on you."

Hadorious was picking a fight. If Reiji paid too much attention to the people around him, naturally his actions from here on out would be hindered. The lengths he'd gone to to try and save Suimei when he heard about the trade corps proved that much.

"Well, it's just as it sounded when you first said it, huh?"

"If you think about Liliana's case as well, I do not think it is all that unreasonable a request."

Titania argued for the validity of her suggestion quite convincingly, yet Suimei only shook his head.

"But if that's how it is, it's troublesome for me."

"Why is that?"

"I mentioned this in passing to Reiji yesterday too, but I'm looking for a means to return to my own world."

Suimei shrugged his shoulders as he once again spoke of his objective.

"So you understand, right? If I do as you're asking, I won't be able to continue my search."

"That may be the case. However, your search need not be carried out right away, no? Eventually, Reiji-sama will defeat the Demon Lord. Once he does, Duke Hadorious would also stop meddling, and you'll be able to search to your heart's content for a way to return to your world."

"So what're you saying? I should just wait until then? Wait until Reiji defeats the Demon Lord and the threat to this world vanishes? How long will that take? A year? Two? It very well could be five or ten, you know? That'll be too late."

"Suimei, I am fully aware of your circumstances. However, this is something that is necessary to definitively bring peace to this world."

"This world this, this world that. How many times do I have to listen to this? Especially lately, that's all anyone talks about."

Suimei spat out his complaint along with a sigh. However, Titania had a fair amount of consideration for him, and urged a reply despite his rudeness to her.

"And so, your answer?"

"I refuse. I'm suffering through this because I was arbitrarily summoned. I have no reason to just drop what I want to be doing in

addition to that."

"I said so before as well, did I not? That if you continue down this path, you will become a burden to Reiji-sama?"

"Because of this Hadorious guy, right? I'll handle things skillfully from my end. If Reiji is worried about me, just tell him not to be yourself, Tia."

"Do you think that kindhearted Reiji-sama would listen to that?"

"I have no intention of taking into consideration that guy's meddlesome nature."

As Suimei rejected her rather flatly, Titania let out a troubled sigh.

"...At this rate, we are just walking on parallel lines, I see."

"Despite that, you're quite calm."

"Somehow or other, I thought it would turn out this way."

"Then don't you have another hand ready to play? Where's your trump card to convince me?"

If she had predicted Suimei's answer and arguments, then she should have had something else prepared in advance. There was no way she would go this far to talk to him, just to have it end like this. Titania then steeled herself and looked at Suimei firmly.

"If you will not obey my orders, I will have you follow them by force."

"Huh? Hey now..."

Those words were completely unexpected to Suimei. He thought for sure she would offer to have someone else do the searching for him. But what she said was nothing of the sort.

"If you insist on continuing to search for a way to return to your world, though it will not be quite to the same extent as Reiji-sama, many difficulties would stand in your way. There will be monsters and demons, as well as Duke Hadorious. In that case, if you are unable to defeat even me, you will be unable to search for a means to return to your world. Is that not reasonable?"

"Sure, but..."

"Therefore, I will fight with you here so that you may prove your strength to me. Of course, if you win, I will allow you to do as you please."

"So that's what you mean by force... It's certainly violent."

"Sometimes violence is necessary. What will you do?"

"I refuse."

As Suimei flatly refused again, Titania let out an unbecoming sneer.

"In that case, you will be labeled as a coward, you know? Even then, will you refuse?"

"By who? You? I don't really care what you have to say about me, honestly... But that won't exactly end our little talk though, will it?"

"Of course not."

Suimei let out a deep groan as he grimaced at Titania's declaration.

"...So what's the deal? If it's a fight, do you want a magic duel?"

"No, I mean this."

With that, Titania took a sword from the bundle strapped to the horse and brandished it.

"What? A swordfight? Tia, can you use that kinda thing?"

"To a certain extent. I am knowledgeable on the subject."

"You heard from Reiji that I can use kenjutsu, right? It should be obvious, but don't I have the advantage? Wouldn't that be unfair?"

"I do not mind. What is your reply?"

Titania was needling him with questions like she was cross-examining him. Suimei couldn't grasp her intentions. She lowered her head a bit, covering her mouth and the bottom half of her face with the collar to her overcoat. It hid the subtleties of her cold and stiff expression, and made her impossible to read. If she used a sword, Titania should have been at a disadvantage as a mage. But his certainty in that disappeared into the ether when he was no longer able to read her.

Just what should he do? Suimei still didn't want to take part in any match, but surely she wouldn't push him that far. If he used magicka to put her under the effects of a hypnotic suggestion, it would be quite simple to get through this situation, but...

"With this, the four of us are all officially good friends."

Suimei recalled what Titania had said to him before they parted ways at the castle. She hardly had any close friends, and surely didn't have many a chance to say such things. But the words she'd spoken that day undoubtedly came from the bottom of her heart. It would be hard for him to use magicka to control someone who considered him a good friend. Titania began to look like she was running out of patience, and Suimei let out a troubled sigh.

"...I'd like to refuse, but I feel like you'd just take a swing at me if I did."

"If you understand that, then how about a proper answer?"

As she spoke, the tone of her voice dropped considerably.

"I do not wish to fight you either. However, there are things that I must do, and things I must take responsibility for."

She hung her head like she was confessing that she had no other option. She wasn't exactly enjoying the situation she was putting Suimei in, after all.

"I don't really mind. I'm also doing what I have to. So even if you summoning me was what you thought you had to do, there's no reason for you not to keep doing what you think you need to."

"You are kind in the strangest ways."

"That 'strangest' part was unnecessary."

"This is what Mizuki calls being... a tsundere, right?"

"Hey, enough with that. Seriously."

As Titania stared at him briefly in astonishment, Suimei swiftly exchanged his disgruntled expression for a serious one.

"Let me ask one last thing. After this, you won't trouble me in the future, right?"

"Yes. I swear it in the name of the Goddess Alshuna. If I lose, I promise I will not say or do a single thing in regards to Suimei's actions henceforth."

"Got it. So, what about my sword?"

As Suimei held out his hand, Titania tossed him the sword she'd been holding. It seemed she had another prepared for herself. It was likely meant to give her an advantage, but Suimei had been learning kenjutsu since he was a child. Whatever the circumstances may be, he wasn't about to lose to her. Titania then took another bundle from the horse and pulled two long swords from it.

"Oh?"

"This is my weapon of choice."

As she said that, she drew both swords from their sheaths. They were made of a different material than the sword Reiji carried—silver. Seeing such a thing in this place was unexpected, but Suimei guessed it was probably corroded silver. Seeing that she drew both blades together, he also assumed she used a twin-wielding sword style. Contrary to common principles for that style, however, both of her swords were long. Generally, one of them would be dedicated to defense. So that it would be easier to handle, a shorter sword was

typically used in the wielder's non-dominant hand. But both of the princess's blades were the same length. No, using his eyes as a magician, he could tell a slight difference between them. The one on the left appeared ever so slightly longer to him. As Suimei was assessing her with a puzzled gaze, Titania took her stance...

"Wha—?!"

Titania hid her mouth behind her collar. And just as she crossed her swords, Suimei's entire body shuddered.

"As I would expect of someone who's studied the ways of the blade. Once I took a stance, you were able to ascertain my capabilities, right?"

Titania saw through the subtleties of Suimei's agitation. Her words of praise rang in Suimei's ears like the voice of the devil. He had taken the sword she'd given him thinking that there was no way he could lose, but just how careless had he been? As a ferocious smile overpowered him, he put on his own smile to conceal his panic.

"Man... I want to curse myself for not knowing until you took a stance. What's with this little princess? Aren't you a mage?"

"Certainly, I also use magic. But the fundamentals of my fighting style would be this. Ever since I was of a tender age, I have wielded a sword."

"Seriously...?"

"With this, you understand, correct? Our match is not unfair as you had suggested before. Indeed, I have the upper hand here in terms of skill with a blade."

"...My goodness, you sure reeled me in quite skillfully. You're really quite the stubborn, spoiled girl."

"I will take that as a compliment."

With that, Titania twirled the two swords in her hands like batons. The sound of the wind they generated filled the air, and then she swiftly crossed them in front of her once more. At the same time, she unleashed her intense fighting spirit. With Titania as its center, a wave of power surged into the surrounding area like a sudden spring storm. After the illusion of wind brought on by her fighting spirit, a tense silence fell over the area. Then, finally, her name rang over the desolate hill.

"One of the Seven Swords: Twilight, Titania Root Astel. Here I come."

She stood at the ready to confront Suimei, who still had

goosebumps from feeling her fighting spirit. Finally realizing that he was only a step outside of her range, he put on a bluffing smile.

"Man, you being such an expert is seriously scary..."

Suimei then took his own stance. The pressure she exuded against him was strong and sharp. It was comparable to Lefille's when she was fighting the demons. The girl before him had her swords crossed in her signature stance. Even when looking at her with his magician's eyes, he couldn't spot anything resembling an opening.

There were two typical styles when it came to twin-wielding swords. The first was where the user held both blades aloft and pressured their opponent with the extra threat of two swords ready to strike; the second was where both swords were held crossed in front of the user, ready for both offense and defense. Titania's was the latter. Holding her swords in front of her still, her body sank towards the ground. It was a low stance, just as low as it could go. Like a leopard. There was no doubt that she was planning to lunge from there. In that case, what Suimei should be vigilant about was her speed and charging power.

However, there was the matter of her two blades. Seeing how neither was a short sword, they should be hard to handle. Under normal circumstances, it would be something to tease one about as an amateur swordsman, but...

No, just like her charging power and speed, this point exceeded Suimei's expectations. In his head, he pictured the beginning of the battle with a blue flash followed by a double cross. He imagined that her speed was far beyond his initial estimates. While he was pondering this, her swords drew a curve through the air.

"Wai—?!"

Suimei hurriedly stepped back and stuck out his sword to defend. When the silver light from her slash vanished, Suimei leaped backward outside of her range. And then, once more looking at his own sword, he doubted his own eyes. The blade he'd blocked with in a hurry was only half of what it had been before. On top of that, the section where it was cut off looked like a warm spoon scooped out some pudding, leaving behind a completely smooth cross section.

"H-Hey! Wait a sec! What kinda technique was that?!"

"My sword techniques are unlike that of other swordsmen in that mine is a wicked sword style. Normally, no one would be able

to cut a blade without a straightforward strike, but my blades can cut anything even if they curve in the air."

Her long swords once more let off an audible wind as Titania declared this, and Suimei's back shuddered once more. Really, it should have been physically impossible, but Suimei knew better than anyone that there were exceptions to everything. It was very likely that this girl who was called a princess inhabited that territory. Suimei didn't spend even two seconds thinking about such things, but even in that small window, Titania had already closed the distance on him.

"Too fast, damn it!"

Complaining, Suimei leaped to the side. However, because his evasive action was completely sensible and predictable, Titania's gaze didn't stray from him for even an instant. She immediately took a horizontal swing to try and catch him. Suimei used his now shortened sword to ward off the attack, but he was at an obvious disadvantage. No matter how much he struggled, he was unable to avoid his future situation getting gradually worse and worse.

Suddenly, Titania brandished her right sword. Sensing a strike from overhead, Suimei reacted instinctively without thinking about it. The sword came down on him from above as if to knock him down entirely.

"That move is too naive."

She let out a declaration like the cold touch of a blade. The move she mentioned, Suimei's sudden reaction, was a single cheap strike that wouldn't even stop Suimei. As he began grumbling about how he was being reeled in perfectly, both her swords promptly joined their trajectories together. He wouldn't be able to block it. But worse, his knees suddenly gave in.

"What—?!"

His legs were swept out from under him. It was too late by the time he noticed. Suimei was unable to maintain his posture and clumsily fell onto his butt. What caught his eye next was the piercing silver light reflecting off her blade. He was able to react, but he was in the worst possible position. That silver light was darting right at his neck.

"You weren't even able to put up a brave fight. So, with this, it is decided. Suimei, I will proclaim your loss here."

As expected, a cold verdict descended upon him. Titania's fighting spirit was telling him to just give in and accept her

conditions as she pressed her blade against his neck. However...

"Sorry, but I can't really allow that."

"The victor has already been decided, I'm afraid."

Though Titania once more declared her verdict, Suimei adamantly shook his head.

"Why? Why are you so obstinate on this matter?"

"I have a promise in that world that I must return to and fulfill no matter what. Besides, I have things here that I need to accomplish as well."

Suimei spoke as he looked up at Titania. He had to return; there was no other option. He now also had Liliana and Lefille on his hands. He couldn't readily accept defeat here.

"Is that so...? Then, it is regrettable, but I will have to put you through a painful experience."

"A painful experience? And just what do you plan to do?"

"If you're injured, you will be unable to continue your search yourself. You'll be forced to leave it to White Flame-dono."

"You really are violent..."

"I will not apologize. This is the duty that I must bear, after all."

The light in Titania's eyes turned cold. It was intimidating, but perhaps due to that change, she blinked. In that brief moment that was not even a second long, Suimei suddenly disappeared from her sight.

"Wha—?! Where?!"

Suimei vanished the instant she cooled her spirit. Looking for the missing boy, Titania turned to her left and right. Still, however, he was nowhere to be found. Only his voice reverberated in the air.

"You've misread the situation, little princess. Was it not a little early to declare the outcome?"

"Where are you?!"

"Right here."

Compared to before, his voice was now filled with determination as it rang through the air loud and clear. As it did, multiple explosions burst forth from beneath the earth around Titania, strong enough to overturn the ground. While maintaining her stance, Titania leaped forward and landed behind Suimei. He was now wearing a black suit that she wasn't familiar with. For some reason, his right arm was extended like he'd just finished snapping his fingers.

Looking at Titania's face, which was seized by shock, Suimei quietly took a breath as he resigned himself... The bad aftertaste of using magicka on a friend who wasn't even a magician lingered in his mouth. It was as if he was holding that feeling deep in his heart so he would never forget. Unless something terrible happened, it was something he'd already decided he would never do. But he had to step up to the plate here in order to take responsibility for the people he'd taken into his care. He couldn't quit here. And so, he flipped up his coattails.

"So be it. I will also name myself before you, little princess. I am a fellow of the Magician's Society, the magician Yakagi Suimei."

And with a thunderous roar, their surroundings were swallowed by his powerful mana.

★

Now that Titania thought back on it, this young man's actions were always full of mystery.

Due to an accident with the hero summoning ritual, he was one of two people summoned other than the hero. Not only that, he was the one who refused to accompany his friends on their journey. He said that he wanted no part in any such dangerous undertakings—a completely selfish and willful statement. He said time and time again he had no reason to bend to arbitrary requests. Normally, it should not have been strange for his friends to condemn him for this, but unexpectedly, Reiji and Mizuki's trust in him had never wavered. Titania had never once heard them speak ill of him.

But even this she could understand. Though he'd been abrasive, they were very familiar with Suimei's disposition. They were his friends, after all, and wouldn't hold something like that against him. However, Felmenia—who was such a menacing and serious person—had ended up getting involved with him at some point when Titania wasn't looking too. Even her father, King Almadious, who Suimei had once slandered, had put his trust in the strange boy from another world. On top of all that, he'd chosen to leave the safety of the royal castle and Metel. Along the way, he was caught in Hadorious's schemes, yet had managed to escape.

And now in a foreign country—not to mention it was a foreign world for him in the first place—he'd managed to set up a base. He was even sheltering a young girl who was being pursued by the

imperial army. Each and every new thing she learned about him was completely mysterious. But even then, he seemed to gain the trust of everyone he met.

Perhaps that fact was one of the threads guiding Titania, but she could not understand just what was happening in front of her eyes. The green hills and blue sky that extended out all the way to the horizon were now shrouded in a storm of thick mana. And then, in an event that she had never witnessed before, an outrageous power manifested.

The power, which was interfering with their surroundings, was terrifyingly strong. The only way she could think to describe it was as if the world itself had changed. The refreshing wind was now howling and whipping around wildly due to the influence of the intense mana. Perhaps because they'd sensed the danger in this place, the birds that were resting in the trees in the distance all flew off at once. Even the small animals and insects on the ground defenselessly revealed themselves in order to flee the area.

And the cause of all this was the young man in front of her eyes: Suimei Yakagi. He was not letting out his fighting spirit like a warrior, he was exuding the incredible pressure of extraordinary mana. The power of the mages she had met up until now... No, even if they somehow all combined their power, it would surely fall short of what she was experiencing now. For someone who had just started to learn magic, this was impossible.

"Yesterday, you said that you had just begun to learn magic from White Flame-dono... Was that a lie?"

"Not exactly, you know? I had Menia teach me quite a bit about the spells of this world, after all. It's just that I failed to mention that I was able to use magicka from the very beginning."

"But I heard that there was no magic in your world..."

"That was a conversation within Reiji's realm of knowledge. Because of the development of science, it went underground and just doesn't make itself known to the world at large. But let me assure you, it does exist. That's what you're seeing and feeling now."

Suimei indifferently confessed his secret. But he had not called himself a mage. No, he called himself a magician.

"You're a magician...? I-It couldn't be... You're the man in black that Rajas was talking about?!"

"Now that you mention it, Menia did say that blockhead let that

slip in the end... But yeah, that's right. I beat down every last one of that lot."

"E-Every last one... An army ten thousand strong, all by your hand?"

"Seems so. I didn't have the leisure to stop and count at the time. I was also surprised when I heard the number afterwards, honestly. Heh heh..."

The man before her eyes began to brag as he let out a strange laugh. It was not the fearless laughter of one who'd kicked aside a bunch of small fry; it was like he was ridiculing his own thoughtlessness at the time. He was laughing at himself.

"...If you hold that much power, why did you refuse to accompany Reiji-sama?"

"I can say the same thing right back at you, right? With that much strength, I don't believe you even need a hero, I gotta say."

"You did not answer my question."

As she flatly pressed Suimei for an answer, he let out a snort like he was not amused in the least.

"I said so before, didn't I? I want to return to my own world. To go out and try and defeat your Demon Lord would be moving in the complete opposite direction from my goal. Get it? So I had no choice but to split up from you guys and move on my own."

"Reiji-sama is your best friend, is he not?"

"That's right. But even though we're friends, there are still things I will and will not do for him. Just like Reiji, I have my own desires and ambitions too. There are people that I must protect. So when it came down to choosing Reiji's way or my way, I just chose to follow my own path."

"That—"

As Titania was about to speak, Suimei pointed a sharp gaze at her like the tip of a steel blade.

"'That kind of reason cannot stand on its own?' Don't you dare spout bullshit like that. Reiji heard your stupid story and decided to take on the Demon Lord for you. I don't know whether he actually scrutinized the details or not, but it was something he chose for himself. At the time, he didn't even consider my opinion or how I normally reacted in such situations. So if I stepped in and handled it for him, it would only be meddlesome."

His words were certainly true. At that time, Reiji had not once asked for Suimei's opinion. He'd decided to take part in the demon

subjugation all on his own. In terms of who'd turned away from the other first, the real answer would be Reiji. But even then, Reiji had never demanded that Suimei provide his assistance unreasonably. In that case, it seemed like a very reasonable resolution that their paths split. Suimei grabbed the lapel under his coat and put his appearance in order. His polished black shoes flattened the grass before him as he stepped forward.

"Let's start over. If you'll come at me with your sword skills, then this time I will have you allow me to use my magicka."

Immediately following his declaration, his mana erupted. A violent squall was born. It was as if the air around them formed an invisible wall that was pushing forward.

He's coming—

The moment that thought crossed Titania's mind, her body reacted before she even realized it and she began running. Fighting against the wall that was impeding her movement, she darted forward on the diagonal as if to slice through it. She was aiming for Suimei's flank. She was running at full speed. The moment she decided her goal was to go around and cut in, she held both her swords in a backhand grip and kicked off the grass. As she crossed her swords before her and leaped towards Suimei, who was standing there defenselessly, he calmly held out his left hand wrapped in bandages.

"Primum moenia, expansio localis!"

[First rampart, local expansion!]

The moment Suimei chanted his spell, a golden magic circle drew itself in the air before his left hand. The point of both of her blades collided with it shortly after. When they did, they stopped short like they'd hit a shield, and sparks flew every which way like they were rubbing against one. Titania wondered if the circle drawn using the light of mana in that empty space was defensive magic. Even though there should be nothing there, the point of her swords could not advance even a single micron.

"Urgh!"

Due to her leap at full power, she was now in a bad position where she was completely stalled on the magic circle. In this state, she would be unable to change her stance. At this rate, if he used that power from beneath the earth again, she would be unable to defend against while she landed. It was possible for her to regain her posture from here, but Suimei's right hand was already on the

move and didn't seem like it would grant her that.

"Permutato, coagulato, vis existito!"

[Transform, coagulate, become power!]

He chanted another spell just as Titania landed on the ground. The silver liquid pouring out of the vial in his right hand transformed into a blade. Anticipating this change as it swung back, he grasped the newly-formed sword unerringly. As the magic circle vanished, a sharp wind assaulted Titania from the side. She didn't really think that he was switching to using a sword. And meeting her expectations, Suimei unleashed a delightful snap from his left thumb and forefinger. The ground between Suimei and Titania then exploded. This was the technique he'd used to blow up the ground earlier. There was no chant at all; it was a fiendish magic.

"Illustre carmen ad operationem maximam! Armat ad centum et juctim diducit—invocato Augoeides! Carpet Bombing!"

[Illustrious spell at maximum operation! Arm from one to a hundred and deploy serially—invoke Augoeides! Carpet Bombing!]

"—?!"

Suimei's voice put a surprised expression on Titania's face. Her next move and all her plans were thoroughly and utterly blown away. In the empty sky above Suimei, a magic circle had spread out like it was watching over him. One after the other, Titania saw circles and figures inside them drawn by mana appearing.

The blue scenery beyond Suimei was completely painted over by the brilliant magic circles. Titania could find no other words to describe it. Before this scene that sent shivers down her spine, she was barely able to breathe, much less speak. Escaping outside of the range of such a spell was not an option. She had no idea how far that would even be, or how quickly it would fire, for that matter. The magic circles spread out all over. They easily numbered around a hundred. Even if she just ran, with but a few seconds to spare, she would never be able to cover enough ground.

There was only one thing she could do. Judging by the glimmer in the sky, she had to sense the moment the light would plunge down, predict its path based on the presence of its mana, and then evade on the spot...

And in that rain caused by the mana's brilliance, just how long would she be forced to dance? After who knew how long, she realized that, together with the end of the violent music being played by that magic, the magic itself had also come to a stop.

“Ah, as expected, you’re quite skilled. Or would it be more accurate to praise your footwork? To see through all of that and dodge it all perfectly isn’t human. Frankly speaking, I really have no idea why you even summoned someone like Reiji.”

The face of the man before her as he boasted was cold and biting. He seemed to be praising her for dodging all of his magic, but thinking about the fatal opening she’d left before, she couldn’t feel happy about it.

This was bad. The battle instincts that she’d built up over the years were ringing alarm bells in her head without end. Suimei’s magic ability and the spells he used were incomparable to the magic of this world. Its destructive power needn’t even be mentioned, but the speed of its use and its versatility were far beyond what she knew to be possible. Perhaps because Suimei saw the color of Titania’s face while she was thinking such things, he issued an odd warning.

“I said this to Menia once as well, but the magicka of my world and the magic of this world simply have different purposes. You’re better off not lumping them together when you think about it, you hear?”

The man who called himself a magician closed a single eye as he said this. After a moment, he opened it again. What appeared in the reflection of his red hot eyes filled with a strong will... was desire. When they spoke the previous day, he’d said that he saved Lefille. There was also talk of him saving Liliana. Felmenia said that she admired him and his way of life. Just what compelled this man who possessed such preposterous amounts of mana that he could subdue all creation... Just what was it that made him say he must return to his own world no matter what? Just what was awaiting him there?

Titania took a good look at the man standing before her. He was always cynical, playing the comedian, and had a bland appearance, but right now... Right now, he radiated wisdom. If he’d carried himself this way when he first arrived, Titania would have believed that he was the hero beyond a shadow of doubt. Right now, that’s what Suimei looked like to her.

“We summoned someone who had yet to become a hero, and someone who was already a hero...”

Titania was unsure if her flustered, muttering voice reached his ears or not. But Suimei Yakagi scoffed at her in dissatisfaction, as if

he was saying he never had any intentions of being such a thing. His eyes looked like they could pierce through any and all conviction without ever wavering.

"I am who I am. Someone you can find anywhere. Just a magician."

His words were the signal for the third round of their fight, though to Titania, it sounded like he was completely bored.

★

After firing off his magicka and refraining from continuing the attack, Suimei's fight with Titania was now picking up again. The girl before him readjusted her stance, and once more unleashed the fighting spirit she'd demonstrated at the beginning of the fight. Despite witnessing Suimei's magicka and overpowering pressure, the fighting spirit reflected in her eyes hadn't weakened at all.

Just as he'd surmised before, her swords were very likely made of corroded silver. It was a material created by using alchemy to treat silver via decomposition, purification, and sublimation. In other words, it was melted and reduced using alkahest, had its molecular arrangement modified, and then was transformed into a material with much stronger molecular bonds than before. It seemed that this world indeed had alchemy, though Suimei was doubtful as to whether or not this world was actually capable of understanding and using a technique like alkahest.

But from what he could see, its inherent mana and its sturdiness were quite comparable. He could say with relative certainty that even if it wasn't the real deal, there was an eight or nine chance out of ten that it was just as good.

However, the swords weren't what made her frightening. It was her technique while she was wielding them. Her ability to manipulate two long swords was impressive, but what he really admired was her arcing strikes. Her swords' absurd trajectories traced curves in the air. He wasn't sure what kind of technique could do that, but it was able to cut earth and stone like butter. It was truly terrifying.

But even then, if they only had tremendous cutting power, that would be one thing. The difficulty in receiving her strikes was what made her swordsmanship truly awe-inspiring. When he tried to take her first strike, he'd foolishly thought he would be able to flick it

away. But Titania's sword struck on a diagonal and couldn't be stopped. Without exception. He was unable to parry, making his style of leaving the sword to its own natural flow worthless against her.

The moment Suimei misread what would happen immediately after taking a blow, his loss would be decided. If he blocked all her strikes using the rampart, it would be a different matter, but in his current physical condition, that would be quite difficult. Deploying his rampart in all directions would take far too much time. Even if he got by using a single rampart in one direction, he would still be open to attacks in the gap between the ground and his circle, as well as from the sides and behind. A swift swordsman was basically the natural enemy of any magician. The instant one stopped attacking or defending, they would unerringly cut them down.

But Suimei still had a reason he couldn't lose. His body wasn't in perfect shape, but for someone like him who wouldn't spare his own life for a worthy cause, that wouldn't stop him.

Titania skillfully rotated her grip on the sword in her hand. When it stopped, she immediately closed the distance and lashed out with the silver blade. It happened so fast that he couldn't even perceive her exhaling. It was quite a high level technique, and was always accompanied by the sound of rushing wind.

Suimei greeted the attack with his strike magicka. In the middle of striking out, the air in front of her eyes exploded. But it did not hit her. In the brief instant right before it exploded, she must have perceived the air warping against her skin. Ignoring the shock wave, she leaped forward and once more let loose her swift, arcing sword technique.

"Hah!"

The point of her left sword came around on him. If he fell back, it would be far enough for him to evade. Or perhaps not. The sword in her left hand was the longer of the two. Counting on evading by a hair's breadth would be simply foolish. More than just breaking his posture, he'd have to throw himself to the ground.

"Tch."

Clicking his tongue, Suimei indeed evaded the blade aimed right above his eyelids by the skin of his teeth and rolled to the ground in the aftermath. After a single rotation, Titania was already greeting him with the next attack. For an instant, he could see a somewhat dissatisfied expression on her face. It was as though she

was wordlessly telling him that if her strike had met its target, the fight would have ended with blood pouring into Suimei's eyes.

Suimei sensed her pursuit as the sword in her hand rotated and whirled around. Once more, she slashed at him as she jumped forward. That was fine. While evading, he had trouble judging whether it was an overhand or underhand strike, such was its speed.

"Ugh—!"

Striking the ground with all her strength, her body rose up from the force. With speed that could be mistaken for instantaneous movement, Titania appeared before his eyes. She then spread out the swords she'd mostly held crossed in front of her. When she did, a flash of silver light drew a straight, wide horizontal line in the air before Suimei's eyes. It was accompanied by a short whistle from the slash. His only way out was to judge her range from the length of her swords and the length of her arms. If she held the same principles as the sword masters from his world, this was where Suimei would have died.

"Then how about this?!"

With a shout to raise her spirits, Titania practically transformed into a gale running along the ground. The figure of her fluttering overcoat vanished from Suimei's sight. By the time he grasped her position and trained his eyes on her once more, she was headed straight towards him. Before he could finish turning his body, he could see Titania's blade tearing up the ground.

Titania was running while gouging the ground below with one sword. Leaving behind a trail of dirt and grass, she was running towards him without losing any momentum. By holding one sword in the ground and holding back the other, she was gathering her strength for a strike. In other words, she was using one sword as something of an anchor. The moment she lifted it out of the ground, at several times the speed of a normal sword strike, a slashing attack came towards Suimei.

Without any hesitation, Suimei dropped the mercury katana in his hand and built up his golden rampart. However, Titania suddenly deviated from her frontal attack and was now moving as if to strike him from the side. She was coming from the right. Suimei had given up on determining her precise location, and he blindly pointed his rampart to the right. Sparks went flying. He had blocked the attack, but for some reason, he could feel fierce chills

running down his spine.

Promptly obeying his instincts and leaping backwards, the point of Titania's sword tore through the air and grazed Suimei's cheek. Not an instant later, the next stab came flying in, and she repeated the combination over and over. The rapid onslaught of interweaving thrusts from her two swords was relentless. If it had been the work of rapiers, there would be feints mixed in with the thrusts, but each and every one Titania's strikes was intended to kill.

Without overlooking the target of those thrusts, Suimei evaded one attack after another. And then the thrusts stopped coming. At this distance, it would be best for him to put up his rampart, get some distance, and begin using magicka, but... No. Judging that putting up any more defenses would be a stupid plan, Suimei moved forward. At his sudden advance, Titania's face twisted with suspicion. But after seeing him pick up his mercury katana, her expression changed to one of surprise. But...

"You dare make light of me, Suimei?"

As Titania huffed out those words, the joy of victory flashed on her face. Faster than Suimei could even prepare his blade, she lunged at him. Her aim was his abdomen. She was surely planning on striking the narrow gap between his internal organs.

He had no time to dodge this swift thrust, and he was defenseless. It would definitely hit. Comparing their abilities and speed with their blades, Titania was the clear superior. However, that was something that Suimei was fully aware of. If she wasn't that good, it would pose a problem for him. And sure enough, Titania's blade plunged into Suimei's body and penetrated right through it.

"With this, it's over, Sui—Wha?!"

In the middle of declaring her victory, Suimei's body suddenly melted away like water. Without giving her any time to recover from her surprise, Suimei wrapped the pitch black, coal tar-like liquid he'd transformed into around her body and hardened it. With this, he stole her freedom of movement. Titania tottered, tumbling onto the grass. After enduring the shock of the fall, she looked up to see Suimei standing over her.

"That's my win."

"To think you could even transform your own body... You really got me."

Titania admitted that much in a vexed voice only after literally losing the ability to use her hands and legs. Suimei judged that it was safe to release the magicka around her body based on her tone and the fact that she was no longer radiating her fighting spirit.

"So?"

"...I understand. I will graciously accept my defeat."

"So you don't care if I act freely now, right?"

"With that level of ability, I do not have any reason to complain."

And so it was settled. As Titania went to pick her swords back up, she looked at Suimei with a somewhat puzzled expression.

"Suimei, why do you hide your power?"

"In my world, it's the natural thing to do. Old habits die hard."

"Is that really how it is...?"

Titania made a disagreeable face as though she wasn't really convinced. It only lasted a moment, however. Her attitude then took a strange turn.

"I have something that I would like to request of you, Suimei."

"What?"

"I would like you not to speak of what happened here with Reiji-sama. Even though it is a selfish request from the one who challenged you, might I trust your silence on the matter?"

Certainly, she'd fought him in an attempt to force him to do what she told him to do. Suimei wasn't going to say it, but the princess had herself—she was being selfish. Even now. But Suimei had no reason to refuse.

"Yeah, sure. I feel the same way, so it's fine with me. I won't mention our little skirmish."

However, that wasn't exactly what Titania was talking about.

"No, not that, precisely. It mean about the fact that I use a sword. Um... I said I don't want to talk about it, but... How do I put it...?"

"Hmm? Reiji and the others don't know how strong you are? Why haven't you told them?"

"Th-That is, um... I have a reason for not wanting them to know."

"What could possibly make you want to keep that from them?"

As Suimei asked her that, Titania's face suddenly flushed red.

"B-Because, because...! If Reiji-sama considers me to be some tomboy, he would dislike me, would he not?!"

At her sudden shouting, Suimei stiffened up with a dumbfounded stare. He couldn't properly parse the details of what she'd just said. But finally, he managed to give voice to how he felt.

"Huh...?"

"'Huh?!' What is with that idiotic face?!"

"Don't make fun of me! But seriously... I don't think he would really care about that kinda thing?"

"But that's just conjecture, no? I must keep it a secret! Surely you can understand, can't you?!"

Titania's face, which was pressing ever closer, was dead serious. Was she really so afraid of Reiji disliking her that she'd go to such lengths? He felt like she was missing the mark, but setting that aside...

"Well, I don't mind. I don't really mean to drag out our previous conversation, but how can you give me crap about hiding my power after this?"

"Shut your mouth! I just said I have a proper reason not to tell them!"

Titania was glaring daggers into Suimei as she yelled in response. In a cool flash, however, her anger turned into something of a perplexed attitude.

"A-Anyway, Suimei, I have one more thing I would like to tell you."

"What is this all of a sudden?"

"That magic that you used to defeat me... It is not magic you should use against a lady."

"...Huh?"

"'Huh' again?! That's it?! Think about it carefully!"

Titania was piping mad again. Suimei had no idea why she had to get so angry over it, either. The magicka he'd used was an attack to deliberately mislead his opponent. After liquefying, he coiled around his target and hardened. It restricted his opponent's movements—

After liquefying, he coiled around his target and...

Suimei arrived at his answer, and while turning bright red, voiced his objection.

"I-It really isn't anything perverted, damn it!"

"Even if you think so, the person having it done to them will not! First it's squishy, then it suddenly hardens... It's an extremely weird feeling, you pervert!"

“Don’t say it in such a weird way, you damn tomboy princess!”

As a blushing Titania pointed her sword at him, Suimei quipped back at her magnificently.

★

After his fight with Titania, by the time that Suimei returned to the imperial capital, the day was over and it was completely dark. Right after getting back, Suimei locked himself in a room that was declared off-limits to anyone else. After finishing his work there, he emerged and headed towards the living room.

It was there that he found Reiji relaxing. But since Suimei was looking for someone else, Reiji pointed him outside. Suimei opened the door and stepped out. Standing in the square between the surrounding buildings, he stared up at the starry sky. But once his gaze fell back down to earth, it didn’t take Suimei long to find what he was looking for.

“Hey, Mizuki. What’re you doing out here?”

“Oh, just enjoying the night breeze and a little alone time.”

Mizuki was sitting in one of the chairs left outside watching the moon. Suimei rustled around in his bag and produced the reason he’d come to see her.

“Here, your shoes.”

“My shoes, as in... Why do you have those?”

“Obviously, to sniff them like this...”

“Suimei-kun, that’s perverted...”

When Suimei pantomimed that her shoes stunk, Mizuki reeled back.

“It’s a joke, just a joke. Actually, I’ve been hearing that a lot today... Anyways, these are brand new, you know?”

“Huh? Oh, you’re right. Did you buy these?”

“Well, yeah. Why don’t you try them on?”

Sitting down in the chair beside her, he looked up at the starry sky again. After he pushed the shoes on her, Mizuki began to put them on.

“Oh? These are...”

After getting them on and seeing how they felt, Mizuki began to cutely jump up and down in place. She took a moment to inspect the shoes, and then turned a surprised face to Suimei.

“I bought new ones and adjusted them.”

“What? Is your house a cobbler’s shop and I just didn’t realize it?”

“Not at all. I just have skillful hands... Well, I used some magic I learned. I think those should be somewhat better and quite comfortable to wear, right?”

Suimei flashed an impish smile. The shoes he’d just given her were ones he’d worked on in the off-limits room: his magicka laboratory. After he’d heard that Mizuki was down because she’d worn out her good shoes, he’d hastily used magicka to improve some ready-made shoes so that they’d be more comfortable to wear and last longer. Mizuki threw both her arms in the air in admiration.

“Amazing! Suimei can already handle magic so well!”

“‘So well,’ you say... Can’t you also do all sorts of things like this?”

“I can’t use that kinda handy magic. I prioritized learning magic that was useful in battle, after all... But that’s not the case for you, Suimei-kun, right?”

“Heh, in order to live comfortably, I don’t hold back on principle.”

As Suimei joked around, Mizuki sat back down in her chair and revealed a gentle smile that suited her perfectly.

“That’s just like you, Suimei-kun. Oh, and thanks for these.”

“It’s nothing.”

Suimei replied as he raised his hand lightly. With this, her journey should be at least a little easier.

“Um, actually, Suimei-kun...”

Then Mizuki turned to him with something of a gloomy expression. She was looking down an alley where there was nothing at all. Suimei realized the change that had come over her mood, but simply listened patiently like he always did.

“What is it?”

“You’ve already fought with monsters and demons right?”

“Yeah.”

“When you did, were you scared?”

“I pissed myself.”

As Suimei declared this, Mizuki stood up.

“You liar! Jeez... You’re just a filthy liar. Would someone who’s had a yakuza’s pistol pointed at him and looked *bored* when it happened really do that?”

“What, you still remember that?”

“Of course I do. ’Cause that, back in our world... Those were the most dangerous days of my life, you know?”

She certainly had a point. In the past, when Mizuki was still suffering from chuunibyou, she’d picked up a weapon dropped by a dangerous man and it became quite the disturbance. In the end, Suimei and Reiji came to her rescue. Reiji had attacked, full of righteousness and zeal, but was secretly being supported by Suimei’s magicka all the while.

“Somehow, Suimei-kun, even if a monster was right in front of you, I feel like you’d just be completely calm. You’ve sorta been like that since way back, you know?”

“Well...”

Suimei gave a vague reply, but she was right on point. When they’d first met, Mizuki had noticed that unflinching aura about him—it was part of his immaturity as a magician. Thanks to that, they’d ended up becoming friends, however. And looking closely at his friend now, he could see that her expression had become quite serious.

“But you know... I was scared. That was also the case with the normal demons, but before the stronger demon, I couldn’t move at all.”

“Well, yeah. Wasn’t that guy a demon general?”

A girl who until recently was just a normal student couldn’t possibly stand against Rajas. Even Suimei who had a fair amount of experience with fighting faltered when he first faced the demon general. But Mizuki shook her head. She couldn’t accept that answer.

“Just a little more, if only just a little more... If I’d been able to use my magic, the fighting may have ended right there. Though Reiji-kun defeated him right after...”

“That’s being a little selfish. You stood against a demon general, didn’t you? That’s more than enough.”

“But when it was all over, they got angry at me.”

“They may have been angry at the time, but I think that deep down, they all thought you were amazing.”

“...Really?”

“Really. That’s why you have nothing to worry about.”

Suimei laughed off Mizuki’s worries, telling her it was just needless anxiety. She then looked wistfully up into the night sky.

“Suimei-kun, just what is courage?”

“Hmm...? Wait, no, no, no, no! What is this?”

“Jeez! I’m being serious here!”

“Aaah, okay. I totally thought you’d relapsed or something...”

“You *know* that’s not what it was! Jeez... This is a fantasy world. A world where you really need courage to get by. That’s why I’m asking. Is that so hard to understand?”

“...Yeah, okay. But let me pose a counter-question: how am I supposed to answer something like that? Why don’t you go ask a real-life manga protagonist? Like Reiji, or, you know, Reiji.”

“Because I felt like asking you. You’ve had to go through dangerous things since coming here too, right? That’s why I thought you’d know something about it.”

“You sure say some incredible things. But really, I’m mostly acting out of manly pride, you know?”

“What’s with that?”

“A woman wouldn’t understand.”

“Ugh, you... Why do you only reply with those mean answers?”

As Mizuki was pouting and puffing out her cheeks, Suimei let out a laugh and then a sigh. He then turned to look at her.

“You... Do you want courage?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“It’s not something you can acquire easily, you know?”

“Then how do I acquire it?”

“Dunno.”

As Suimei indifferently asserted that, Mizuki slumped her shoulders and sank into silence. Suimei got a little uncomfortable, took in a breath, and then began speaking again.

“There’s something I’ve heard before. This’ll sound like something you’d say, but people talk about a fire that burns in your heart, right?”

“That’s the hot-blooded type chuunibyou. I’m the cool, evil-eyed chuunibyou type.”

“What’s with that? There’s categories now?”

“That’s right. It’ll be on the test, so you’d better study up,” Mizuki declared in a proud, playful tone.

But the gloom quickly returned. It was from one extreme to another with her. The way she worried too much about things hadn’t changed at all. She must have been thinking about all this the entire way to the imperial capital.

“Mizuki, I don’t really know anything about what you call courage. But, you know, humans have all sorts of emotions. When those emotions become so grand that you’d never lose to what stands in your way, I think that you’ll be able to take a step forward for sure.”

“But I don’t have any grand emotions...”

“You said you’d become Reiji’s strength at the castle, didn’t you? And when you faced Rajas, wasn’t it because of your emotions that you rushed in? Am I wrong?”

“That’s...”

“It’s fine. You already have courage. I don’t know where you keep things you can’t see with your eyes, so it can be a little troublesome... But there’s at least one time in everyone’s life, without exception, where they’re forced to do nothing but grind their teeth. When that time comes, surely you’ll be able to take a step forward.”

As Suimei said all this, Mizuki made a curious face.

“...Talking from experience?”

“Because I learned that far too late, I lost my father.”

“What?”

“Kidding. I told you he died in a traffic accident, right? I was just joking.”

“That’s... unusually dark for you.”

Suimei slapped Mizuki’s slumped shoulders in an attempt to encourage her.

“Well, don’t worry about it so much. You stood up against a monster. Moving forward from there will come soon enough.”

Mizuki hung her head down like she was biting on her words. And when she raised her head again, her gloomy expression from before was just a little bit brighter.

“Yeah. Thanks. I think it may be a little easier now.”

Suimei flashed his usual sly smile in her direction.

While the two of them were talking, it seemed that there was a party of people peeping on them from the second floor window. Four of them, to be exact. Careful not to be heard by Suimei and Mizuki below, Titania whispered to Reiji.

“Suimei is a lot more dependable than I thought he was.”

“To Mizuki, Suimei was her first good friend, after all. He’s special. Honestly, I’m a little jealous of the fact that she can rely on him for things like that.”

Reiji smiled bitterly at the thought that he wasn't dependable. And when Felmenia looked at him, her eyes lit up like she'd just figured something out.

"I see. Is this that thing where you don't want to show your weakness to the person you love?"

"Huh? What are you talking about, Sensei? Who's this person she loves?"

He was deaf. No, rather than his ears being bad, it was more correct to say his intuition was bad. Titania, Felmenia, and Lefille all let out a worried groan.

"No, no. You're supposed to sense it from context, Reiji-dono..." said a somewhat exasperated Felmenia.

"That's Reiji-kun for you..." Lefille replied, equally exasperated.

Reiji, meanwhile, still had no idea what was going on. He was sitting there with a stumped look on his face and his head cocked to the side. In the middle of the four of them peeping on their two friends below, the front door swung wide open. The one who emerged from the house was Liliana.

"Hngh... Suimei, are you there?"

She was in her pajamas, and rather than being tied up in its usual twintails, her reddish-violet hair fell freely behind her. She was hugging a pillow and looked around with sleepy eyes. Even her voice was sleepy. Her steps were a little shaky. She must have wandered outside while still half asleep. Seeing this, Suimei spoke up.

"What's wrong, Liliana?"

"I got lonely."

"What happened to Lefi and Menia?"

Liliana shook her head.

"The two of them... aren't there."

"Aren't there...?"

Hearing that, Suimei was seized with suspicion. What did she mean? This was the only exit to the house, there's no way they weren't inside. Then something set in on him. When he looked up, he could see shadows moving in the upper window.

"So that's how it is..."

He realized they must have been spying on him. Seeing all their heads dive below the windowsill as he looked up, he let out a sigh and stood up from his chair.

"Then shall we go back?"

Liliana let out a big yawn and, still in a sleepy daze, gave him a single big nod.

"She's quite attached to you, huh, Suimei-kun?"

"Hmm, it'd be nice if that was the case."

"What do you mean, 'if?' That's definitely the case. Seriously, that part of you is just like someone I know..."

While talking of such things, the three of them returned to the house.

★

Several days had passed since Suimei's fight with Titania and his talk with Mizuki. In order to gather information on the tall shadow, Suimei was doing his rounds about the city. Perhaps because the lingering heat on them had cooled down, or perhaps because they never had any intent on coming after them in the first place, the authorities hadn't shown any interest in them. As such, Suimei and Felmenia were no longer afraid to show their faces outside.

Their current objective was naturally the capture of the mastermind behind the scenes, the tall shadow. For the time being, Suimei had an idea as to who this was, but for the sake of being able to drive them into a corner, he needed to get a hold of more materials.

Both he and Felmenia split up for the purpose of covering more ground in their search for information. Suimei was on his way back to the base when he'd met up with Reiji, and the two of them were now headed back to the house together. As Suimei walked along languidly, he admired the odd sight of Reiji in his school uniform with a sword at his waist.

"To think you've already memorized the layout of the imperial capital..."

"Yeah? If you just walk around normally, I think it's something that comes pretty naturally..."

Reiji replied like it was completely trivial. He'd spent the day strolling the city alone to memorize its layout. As Suimei lightly nudged him with a fist, Reiji put on a cheerful smile. But then in a drastic one-eighty, his expression turned rather serious.

"Come to think of it, Suimei... If I remember right, you said you were looking for a way back to our world, didn't you?"

“Yeah, I want to return no matter what. Ah, of course once I find it, I’ll let you guys know.”

“You will, huh? That sure you’re going to find it?”

“Don’t underestimate me, you hear? Who the hell do you think I am?”

As Suimei beat his fist against his own chest, Reiji suddenly burst out in laughter.

“That part of you is so very odd...”

“Which?”

“Even though you said you didn’t want anything to do with danger, aren’t you just jumping into danger on your own now?”

“I got enough of that sermon last time... If I don’t brave these dangers, I won’t be able to grasp what I want.”

“Do you want to go back that badly?”

“What, is that weird?”

“No, it’s just that I thought you would find it easier here since this world doesn’t have any shackles for you like ours did.”

As Reiji stared at the sky, Suimei retorted jokingly.

“It’s more relaxing over there, you know? There are plenty of delicious things to eat, too.”

“You’re working hard because you want to relax?”

“That’s just how humans are,” Suimei declared in a self-deprecating manner. He then let out a troubled sigh. “Besides, there are tons of things I left behind.”

“That’s true...”

Reiji cast his gaze downward when he heard those words. There were also things he’d left behind that weighed heavily on his mind. Since Suimei had no living relatives anymore, if anything, it should have been easier for him. One of Reiji’s biggest worries was his family. He thought about them constantly. But rather than never seeing them again, Reiji was more concerned about how they were doing. That was the reason he was so downcast.

“Well, once I find the means and get it to work, I’ll contact you right away, so look forward to it.”

“Heh, thanks.”

While walking back to the house with a lonely atmosphere lingering around them, the boys approached the entry to the alley. There, Suimei spotted a familiar face. It was a beautiful, blond, blue-eyed young man casually loitering about as he took in the surroundings. And as this good-looking young man turned to

Suimei...

"How unusual. You're with a man today?"

The boy who noticed Suimei and let out that sarcastic remark was the hero from the Holy State, Elliot Austin. Seeing as this was Reiji's first time meeting him, he asked Suimei for an introduction.

"Suimei, this is...?"

"This pretty boy seems to be the great hero that was summoned by the Holy State El Meide."

"So that's..."

Cutting short his surprise at their sudden encounter, Reiji stepped before Elliot.

"I am Reiji Shana. It's nice to meet you."

"Reiji? Could you be the hero summoned by Astel...?"

It seemed Elliot had heard the name before. And when he asked about Reiji's identity, he confirmed it. When he did, Elliot gave him a courteous bow and dressed up his greeting.

"I am Elliot Austin. I have heard rumors about you. It seems you defeated a demon general, correct?"

"No, in truth, I didn't really do that..."

"...?"

Before the bewildered Elliot, Reiji let out a troubled sigh and explained what happened at the time. It took a while, but Reiji gave Elliot a rundown of the truth. Elliot made a slightly irritated face as he let out a sigh.

"I see... You got swallowed into politics. How unfortunate."

"That's why those rumors floating around aren't true."

Reiji's expression as he explained everything was tinged with disappointment and woe. It seemed he incredibly disliked these rumors being thrown about. It all made him quite anxious. He was a very serious character, however, so that much was only normal. His ordinarily bright, light brown eyes now reflected a darkness in them. It was enough that Elliot perceived it. Using a considerate tone free of all severity, he gave Reiji some advice.

"Allow me to say this: it is better if you do not let people like that do as they please. All influential people want to make use of those who possess strong power, after all."

"Are you familiar with this yourself?"

"Well, to an extent."

Elliot let out a small sigh. Judging from his behavior, he may just have experienced such hardships in his own world.

“That’s amazing. Back in my world, I was only a student without any sort of power. I’m always late at being able to cope with these kinds of situations.”

As Reiji said this, Elliot looked surprised.

“...Is that so? I must say your movements look awfully well balanced to me.”

“Really? I’d be pleased if that were true.”

With that, Reiji flashed his usual, natural smile. Elliot, who had never witnessed it before, winced.

“—?!”

“What’s wrong?”

Paying Reiji’s question no mind, Elliot turned to Suimei and whispered to him with his hand held up like a partition to keep Reiji from hearing.

“That... It really has a destructive impact, does it not?”

“Don’t turn red, damn it.”

Looking at Elliot’s expression, Suimei let out a sigh. He was tired of hearing this, but he couldn’t laugh off the fact that Reiji’s smile worked on men too. Reiji, who was completely oblivious to all this, was still indeed Reiji.

“At any rate, Austin-san, thank you.”

“Please. In my current situation, I’m not really one to talk. Also, I do not mind if you just call me Elliot.”

Elliot shrugged his shoulders casually like he was trying to be friendly with Reiji. Watching the two of them from the sidelines, Suimei drew in a breath in admiration.

“Somehow... you two really seem to get along, huh?”

“Far more than with you.”

“Shut it.”

As Suimei bluntly replied to Elliot’s cynical gaze, Elliot seemed to have realized something and was now looking at both Suimei and Reiji’s faces.

“Now that I think about it, do you two know each other? I cannot possibly imagine the connection, though.”

“Well, I have a bit of a bond with this guy.”

“A bond, you say...? But never mind that. Is it not rude to refer to a hero as ‘this guy?’”

“...Is it? Are you saying you want me to speak respectfully to you, in a roundabout way?”

“Would you stop that? If you starting talking to me respectfully,

I would have goosebumps running down my body for the rest of my life."

"Understood. Then, though it may be presumptuous of me... My, my, if it is not the valiant hero Elliot-sama. Would you kindly hurry along and enjoy your goosebumps?"

"Urgh..."

Elliot dramatically grabbed his shoulders as Suimei spoke to him politely, albeit sarcastically. Unexpectedly, he seemed to have a decent sense of humor and could roll with the mood.

"...So, I also have something I want to ask, but why are you here?"

"It's nothing. I just came because I heard you were in the area. I came to see just what kind of place you were living in."

"You sure are a whimsical guy," Suimei said in an exasperated voice. Then he remembered something. "But you did pull your weight last time, didn't you?"

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"Nope, not particularly."

As the two of them started talking about things only known between them, Reiji was being left behind. He decided to ask Elliot for details.

"Did something happen?"

"I confronted the culprit behind the coma incidents that have been raising a fuss in the imperial capital. However, unfortunately, they once more got away."

"Oh? You didn't actually fight them?"

"No, there was no quarrel. Just like last time, he escaped like he's playing around with us."

Elliot let out a vexed sigh. During his investigations today, Suimei heard that Elliot managed to corner the tall shadow. The citizens of the imperial capital were praising him. But it seemed that was all a bit off the mark.

"This time, Her Imperial Highness was also present, however. It did not end quite so easily as before."

"I see. In other words, they're quite the master, huh?"

"..."

Suimei then noticed that Elliot had shifted his attention to him. It felt like he was being scanned.

"What's wrong?"

"...It is nothing. Do you think you would be able to defeat

them?"

"I don't know why you're asking me that kind of thing but... As long as I don't know that guy's actual capabilities are, I can't really say anything."

As Suimei wouldn't put up with that kind of guesswork, he unnaturally acted like he had given up. If both Graziella and Elliot had failed at apprehending the tall shadow, he couldn't be careless about it. While they were in the middle of this conversation, Suimei sensed someone else's presence. As he narrowed his eyes and glared off in the direction he sensed it, the presence that realized they'd been found out looked back at him. They drew closer, their presences thinned. After confirming the three people before them, they quietly came out of the shadows.

"My, to think there would be two heroes gathered together."

"Colonel Rogue?"

Just as Elliot had said, the man who emerged from the shadows was the man with swept-back black hair with a bit of gray mixed into it—the imperial soldier Rogue Zandyke. As per his usual, he donned a dark military uniform and a sword hung ostentatiously from his waist. His stern look should have impressed on Suimei that he was dangerous, but for some reason, what stood out to Suimei was the shadow stretching out behind him.

The reason Rogue seemed so small was perhaps because of how large his shadow cast by the setting sun appeared to be. It was like Suimei couldn't tell whether or not it was actually attached to his feet. Rogue stepped forward with a strange gait. His reddish-brown eyes were thin and sharp as he narrowed them to their limit, making his severe face appear even more severe. Reiji quickly drew closer to Suimei to talk to him in secret.

"Suimei, isn't Rogue..."

"Yeah..."

Suimei had shared what he knew about this man with Reiji and the others. As Reiji tensed up, Rogue faced Elliot and gave him a light bow.

"Elliot-dono, Her Imperial Highness Graziella is calling for you. Hurry up and come to the plaza, she says."

Did he come all this way just to relay that message? Hearing Graziella's name, Elliot let out a grand sigh.

"My goodness, that imperial princess really treats her subordinates roughly, huh?"

“I can sympathize with that.”

“If you sympathize with it, then I would like you to trade places with me.”

“Shoo, shoo! Go away.”

Suimei waved his hand to drive him away, but Elliot didn’t really seem to mind at all. As he combed back his blonde hair glistening in the evening sun, he seemed somewhat coquettish to Suimei. He did turn to go, but Reiji called out to him as he did.

“Well, Elliot, I’ll see you again if fate permits.”

“Likewise. I’ll be in your care then, hero from Astel.”

After Elliot responded in kind to Reiji’s refreshing parting words, he left the area. After seeing him off, Rogue turned his thin eyes on Suimei.

“Suimei Yakagi, right?”

“It has been a while.”

“Before the search for Liliana began, you seemed to have met with her, right?”

“...That’s right.”

Suimei was still watching Elliot go and didn’t meet Rogue’s gaze. Rogue then turned and faced Suimei properly.

“I have a fairly obvious question for you, but do you know where Liliana is right now?”

“I haven’t a clue.”

“Is that true?”

“Yes.”

Suimei turned to face Rogue and nodded.

“Is it alright for me to ask something in return?”

“What is it?”

“You seem to be looking for that girl, but if you do find her, what do you plan on doing?”

Rogue looked at Suimei, his eyes full of unrelenting will. After staring for a while, Rogue replied while maintaining his stiff expression.

“I don’t think there is any reason for me to tell you that.”

“As one of the people searching for the culprit behind the coma incidents, I would like to hear your answer.”

“...It should be obvious. I will have her take responsibility for her actions. That is all.”

“Even if her reason for doing so was to protect you?”

“Of course.”

Rogue silently turned away. His words were exactly like his temperament, simply stiff. He was surely the same way when he cornered that little girl. And if that were the case, there may be nothing Suimei could do to topple his will. But even so, Suimei had to say it or he knew he wouldn't be satisfied.

"It may be none of my business, but..."

"Suimei?"

Both Reiji and Rogue turned to face Suimei.

"You are that girl's father, aren't you? Even if you aren't connected by blood, as long as you decided to be her father, you should act like it. At the very least, to the bitter end."

"..."

"Isn't that right? If you're her family, then you should be the one who believes in her, right?"

Suimei told Rogue exactly what was on his mind. But as expected, Rogue's stiff expression never cracked. But once Suimei got that off his chest, he cooled down some and his voice was now quieter than before.

"A parent's responsibilities... Hearing of such things from someone who isn't a parent may certainly seem impertinent. But if we're talking about responsibility..."

"No. I draw the line at calling her my relative. This is my responsibility as her superior officer."

As Rogue left him those words, he went his way without even so much as a glance back. It was as if his figure was relaying his resoluteness to Suimei. But even if he was set in his ways, Suimei still wanted to tell him of the things that girl held in her heart. Yet in the end, all he could do was watch as he walked away. Reiji wore an unusually serious expression as he turned away from Rogue's vanishing figure and brought his face closer to Suimei.

"Suimei... From what I've heard, I think that man is awfully suspicious."

"If this is about the culprit, there's no way that guy is the mastermind."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. No doubt about it. As for the real offender, I do have a clue who it might be."

While Suimei and Reiji were having this exchange, they suddenly became aware of the sound of footsteps rapidly approaching. After belatedly realizing whoever it was was headed

straight for them, they heard someone call out to them as well.

"Suimei-dono! Reiji-dono! It's terrible!"

As they turned around, Felmenia was running towards them as she gasped for breath between her shouts.

★

Within a single room inside Suimei's base was a magicka circle he installed letting out a mystical light. On top of it was Lefille, who was down on one knee in prayer. Her still figure looked just like a devout follower earnestly praying to a god while waiting for a blessing. Or rather, seeing how she was indeed a follower of the Goddess Alshuna's teaching and believed in the Goddess's existence, it wasn't just that the scene *looked* like it. That's precisely what it was. The pure blue beam of light illuminated all the furniture in the gloomy room in a wondrous manner. The beauty of the light was so pristine that it would have been easy to believe no one could invade it.

A knock reverberated in the room. As Lefille opened her thin eyes and turned towards the door, she heard Suimei's voice from the other side.

"Lefi, how is it?"

"Oh, considerably good. Thanks to the circle you made, I feel like I'm getting back into my stride quite well."

"That's good."

Hearing her cheerful voice, Suimei took in a small breath of relief.

"Is something the matter?"

"Yeah, seems like something happened. We're going to all talk about it together, so I came to get you."

"...What could it be? I have a bad feeling."

"Me too."

Hearing his agreement, she could practically see him shrugging through the door. Lefille then stood up and headed to the living room with Suimei. When they arrived, Felmenia and Reiji's group, including their knight escorts had already gathered. Everyone crowded around the table and took their seats. Felmenia then cut to the chase.

"I was outside gathering information in the streets just now, but I heard something that worried me."

Felmenia had a grim expression on like her blood was curdling as she said this, and Suimei cut in to urge her on.

"What's wrong?"

"I was eavesdropping on the soldiers who were talking in the plaza, and they were saying that they have ascertained Liliana's location."

"Sensei, then..."

"So they found this place out..."

Suimei inhaled sharply. The hour had finally arrived. He knew it was only a matter of time, but he was hoping it wouldn't be so soon.

"White Flame-dono, is that for certain?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Using magicka... Using magic, I got the information from deep within the headquarters in the southern plaza. I do not believe there is any mistaking it." After replying to Titania's question, Felmenia continued her report. "But that is not all. I heard a few times that for the purpose of rounding up all those involved with Liliana, they were going to take action this evening."

"In other words, the Empire... Princess Graziella intends to capture all of us."

Lefille let out an ill-humored groan. Certainly if they'd determined her location, it was perfectly expected that they'd also want to take into custody the people who'd been sheltering her. However...

"So the reason that hero was loitering around the area was for this..."

"Elliot?"

"That's probably it."

Suimei nodded at Reiji. Elliot's appearance and now this... The timing was too much of a coincidence. No matter how he looked at it, Elliot had absolutely no reason to be in Suimei's neighborhood. It was unthinkable that his curiosity had gotten the better of him. However, if the strategy was going to take place this evening, him coming to do some preliminary scouting made perfect sense. As for where they managed to get the information on Liliana's location... Suimei had a guess.

Next, Lefille turned to Felmenia.

"Lady Felmenia, will Princess Graziella be coming?"

"Pardon? I believe so. She would probably come herself, right?"

"Huh... Yes, of course..."

Suimei thought it was appropriate. Considering her temperament, there was no way she wouldn't come. However, Lefille was quite fixated on this point for quite some time. In her smaller form, her expressions were quite cute, but for an instant, Suimei saw something reckless and dangerous in her face.

"Suimei-kun, what do we do?"

Before Suimei could answer Mizuki, Liliana's trembling voice spoke up.

"Like I thought... I should surrender."

"I won't let you do that kinda crap. Besides, it's too late even if you leave now."

"But...! At this rate, I'll cause... everyone trouble."

"Don't worry about it. If I stopped to think about everything that troubled me, I couldn't possibly live in this damn world, you know?"

Saying that, Suimei showed Liliana a fearless smile as she hung her head down in gratitude. Lefille turned to Suimei, seeming to share the sentiment.

"I agree completely about Liliana, Suimei-kun. So what will we do from here?"

"We go catch the culprit."

As Suimei announced his plan, the room became noisy for a spell.

"In truth, I'd like to gather more information before making contact. But that won't fly anymore."

"Suimei, you said before that you had a clue as to who the mastermind was, right? Do you have any proof that whoever it is is really the culprit?"

"There's an eight or nine out of ten chance, I'd say. I can't imagine it being anyone else."

Suimei answered Reiji confidently, but Titania followed up with more questions.

"It is fine to go and catch them, but if we do that, will everything be put in order cleanly?"

"Perfectly cleanly would be quite difficult. But we could always skip town in the middle of the night."

Suimei laughed like he didn't think anything of it, but Felmenia and Lefille both sighed and shook their heads. But Titania wasn't done yet.

"And so, Suimei, will we all be going to where the culprit is?"

Suimei was slightly taken aback at this rather strange question from her.

“Whazzat?”

“Why are you making that kind of idiotic face? I am asking if you have some sort of plan, I’ll have you know.”

“So... you’re going to cooperate with me?”

As Suimei looked at her in surprise, Titania gave him a look like she couldn’t believe he was seriously asking her that. Reiji was the one who spoke up next, in something of an astonished voice.

“That’s completely an ‘after all this time’ kind of thing, Suimei. Isn’t it obvious?”

“Yeah, yeah. When we’re in trouble, you’re the same, right?”

“But if you do this, things might become quite difficult for you guys from now on...”

“It’s fine. Besides, the one who always used to cause the trouble was me. I would say something selfish, and Suimei would follow along. That’s the usual flow, right? So I can just think of this as returning the favor.”

After Reiji said that cheerfully, his expression changed. It became resolute and serious.

“Besides, I can’t just turn a blind eye to this.”

Reiji’s voice resonated throughout the room. Those words he fired off were extremely promising. But they made Suimei scratch his head like he was resigning himself.

“Aaand there’s the famous Reiji-ism.”

“He won’t back down no matter what now, Suimei-kun.”

“Yeah... I know.”

Strung along by Mizuki’s smiling face, Suimei also put on a smile before continuing.

“Then... yeah. If you all plan on cooperating, then I’ll take you up on that.”

Everyone present gave Suimei an acknowledging nod. Liliana then stood up from her chair in a fluster.

“Suimei, if you’re going to catch the culprit, please take me with you.”

“I don’t want to let you fight though.”

“But...”

As Liliana clung to him, Suimei could only remain silent. If their opponent was the mastermind behind this case, it would without a doubt be the same person who manipulated Liliana.

Suimei didn't really want them coming in contact with each other. However, an earnest light shone in the eyes of the girl in front of him. It was strong, and told him that even if she couldn't bring this to an end herself, she at least wanted to see it through. And seeing that resolve, as one would expect, Suimei had no choice but to give in.

"But I won't let you use magic, alright?"

"I know."

"You might go through something terrible, you know?"

"I've made up my mind. I do not wish... to run away."

"And you're really okay with this?"

"Yes."

"...Alright then."

With that, Suimei then moved on to talk about his plans for the evening's battle.

★

After finishing their meeting, Suimei called to Felmenia. She was currently headed to the off-limits room he used as his laboratory. He'd called her over without any explanation, and up until now, her brow had been quite wrinkled. Using a special spell to open the door, the one who'd summoned her was deep inside the room arranging some of his research tools.

"Suimei-dono, it is Felmenia Stingray. I have come as requested."

"Oh, you're here. Just sit wherever you want."

Without even looking over at her, Suimei ushered her in with a wave. Doing just as he said, Felmenia sat down in a vacant chair. As she did, Suimei finished organizing his tools and drew closer to her.

"Sorry 'bout that."

"No, I do not mind. So, just what is the matter, Suimei-dono? You only called for me..."

"Aah, well, there's something I specifically wanted to share with you. Also, I thought we should talk about tonight's battle."

"Just with me?"

Suimei nodded back at Felmenia's puzzled question. Based on the preparations they'd just made, it was decided that they would split up into a group to defeat the mastermind, a group to confront Graziella, Elliot, and the imperial forces they lead, and a group to

stall the chase.

"Just as I said before, I have no choice but to go with Liliana. That's why I want you to handle something else for me."

"Eh, and so..."

Perhaps because she wasn't expecting him to say that, Felmenia was making a slightly less dignified expression than normal. Suimei then articulated his thoughts for her.

"That's right. Dealing with Graziella is an important part of this, so I was thinking of leaving that to you, Menia."

"M-Me?! Are you talking about me?!"

"The only one who could face off against that dangerous woman is probably Tia. But we can't really play that hand. And Lefi still can't fight. So all in all, it has to be you."

"B-B-B-B-But...! For me to take on Her Imperial Highness Graziella, are my abilities not a little...?"

"You can't do it?"

"It is obvious! It is unreasonable! She is the strongest mage in all the Empire, you know?!"

Felmenia was shaking her head with all her might.

"But didn't they say that you were the strongest mage in Astel or something?"

"Since the Magic Institute is located in the Empire, their magical studies are at the pinnacle of the entire continent!"

Felmenia was flabbergasted. Even after she finished her sentences, her mouth continued to gape in stammering disbelief. It seemed she was quite shaken by the idea of challenging someone who outranked her. Suimei looked at her in slight exasperation and slight disbelief.

"...Didn't you stylishly talk her down and run away last time?"

"Th-That was what we call spur of the moment! And we're all sold out now, so there will be no second time in that department!"

After vigorously protesting, Felmenia's voice deteriorated into a nervous whine. Her anxieties were getting the better of her.

"Are you still anxious?"

"...Yes."

"It'll be fine. Last time it was definitely quite risky, but now you've studied all sorts of magicka, haven't you? If you move around just as I said and give orders to Reiji and the others, don't worry. You should be able to defeat her, no problem."

"I-Is that true?"

“Yeah.”

Suimei returned a cheerful nod to her before continuing.

“Let’s put off the talk about tonight’s battle for later. First I’ll have you study an important law of magicka theory, mystical entropy.”

“M-Mystical en-tro-py...? It seems like quite the amazing name.”

After hearing something new about magicka theory was involved, Felmenia’s withering figure took a sudden shift as she leaned forward in excitement. It was like the anxiety from her heavy responsibilities had disappeared into the ether. It really showed how much interest she had in the mysteries of magicka.

“That’s true, but before we start on that topic, first let’s do a review. Just what is the thing we call magicka? And what are the necessary actions to use it? Give me the answer. And I don’t mind if you’re brief this time.”

“Very well. Magicka is, so to speak, a phenomenon. Just as lightning will lead to the rise of a storm as long as the climate meets the requirements, in short, magicka occurs as long as the laws produced by a magician fulfill its conditions. It is the lightning and the storm.”

“That’s right.”

“And then, regarding the use of magicka, what is necessary for a phenomenon produced by a magician to manifest itself includes: the construction of the spell, the necessary commitment of mana, any associated gestures, the drawing of a magicka circle, the chanting of the spell, the use of any relevant magicka items, and finally, the invocation of another plane. With combinations of those actions depending on the spell being used, magicka will be invoked.”

Felmenia answered confidently from start to finish, and Suimei nodded in approval. To create lightning using magicka, say the invocation of the magicka required chanting the spell and a magicka circle. In this case, the magicka circle would be the thundercloud, and the chant would be the trigger for the electrical discharge. It was something that responded to actions. They authored the manipulation and alteration of matter. Just as Suimei’s nod indicated, Felmenia had answered correctly. However...

“There is something else that is necessary other than all that. What is it?”

“For a single magicka using those actions, it is necessary to follow the determined processes and dedicate the determined amount of time.”

“Exactly... Mm, in terms of the use of magicka, there are no problems.”

As Suimei gave another satisfied nod, he began pacing like he was pondering something.

“Next is... something for reference. The act of using magicka, in general, is by definition something far detached from common sense.”

“What? The use of magicka is... something that is detached from common sense?”

“That’s right. Well, the people of this world wouldn’t really agree, but please think of it in that way.”

“I see...”

Hearing this, Felmenia knit her brow furiously. In Suimei’s world, it was something completely ordinary, but it was quite understandable that Felmenia was not so convinced.

Because the amount of knowledge the people of this world accumulated was still quite shallow, they had yet to properly distinguish between physical laws and magickal laws. That’s why a law like “an apple released from one’s hand will fall to the floor” and one like “if one performs a chant, magic will occur” were taken at the same face value here—common sense, as it were. But for what he was about to say, being able to perfectly understand that distinction was absolutely necessary.

“Now then, it’s about time we move on to the main topic of mystical entropy. From now on, I’ll just abbreviate it to entropy. It is something that, in a determined place, mixes together ‘the components that establish mystical laws’ and ‘the components that establish physical laws,’ and renders them into a jumbled state. Well, that’s the standard definition with regards to magickal theory.”

“O-Oh...”

It didn’t seem that Felmenia quite understood. But regardless, Suimei continued his explanation.

“First, let’s touch upon the ‘the components which establish physical laws.’ Since you do not know of science, an easy way to put it for you to understand would be the cause of any phenomenon other than phenomena caused by magicka. It is a force that cannot

be directly observed with your eyes."

"Something that cannot be seen, you say?"

"That's right. It may be best to imagine what this world generally calls the Elements. Next are 'the components which establish mystical laws.' This one is just as it sounds. In complete opposition to what I just explained to you, they are what cause mystical phenomenon brought about by magicka. It is also something that you cannot observe by seeing it."

"Aah! Like the Elements! In short, they help in causing things to happen for anything other than magicka, right?"

"That's not quite right... Well, you aren't that far off either..."

Felmenia tilted her head at Suimei's troubled way of speaking. However, Suimei still kept going.

"Think about the entire world, with the exclusion of exceptional locations, as being largely filled with 'the components which establish physical laws.' Because of that, mystical phenomena do not occur so easily... But the physical do. In a simple example, things fall to the ground easily and rubbing two things together makes heat easily. Those things fill the world."

"If the world is largely composed of those components, then just where are 'the components that establish mystical laws?'"

"In certain regions. In short, places where phenomena occur that cannot be clarified by physical laws are called mystical locations. They can also be called places where magicians caused mystical actions. In other words, if one were to use magicka, a space filled with 'the components that establish physical laws' will give birth to 'the components that establish mystical laws'."

"I see."

"And so with the use of magicka, the amount of 'the components that establish mystical laws' in the space increases. Then, in a single space, two different types of components will exist. But this thing called 'the components that establish mystical laws' really hates the other thing called 'the components that establish physical laws,' and like it was born to, it immediately starts fighting with them."

"A fight between components...?"

"If it's difficult to picture, try imagining those two invisible components as tiny people caught in a melee. This is what I meant earlier by a jumbled state."

"Tiny people... I can somewhat picture it thinking of it like

that... But when those tiny people fight, what happens?"

"When the tiny people known as components begin to fight, to put it roughly, all phenomena except for magicka cease to occur properly."

"Are you saying that the phenomenon where objects fall to the ground will have difficulty occurring?"

"Rather than it having difficulty occurring, it would be more correct to say that other effects become easier to produce. And in general, that would manifest in the form of the failure of the original phenomenon."

"So, does that mean the object would cease to fall, and it would be possible to have it fly off in another direction?"

"Speaking very roughly, yes. In practice, as long as it isn't something big, the effect of simple physical laws wouldn't appear, but more advanced physical laws would freely affect it though..."

Suimei hesitated to say it. To Felmenia who did not understand science, explaining advanced physics would take quite some time and it didn't have much relevance to what they were talking about.

"One way or another, I think I understand. To summarize, just from using magicka, it causes a disturbance that makes it easier to produce the desired result, right?"

"Yes. Also, the larger the fight, the larger the entropy becomes. Well, it's an indicator of the scale of the fight."

Suimei nodded at Felmenia's reply. However, for some reason, she wrinkled her brow immediately and tilted her head far to the side.

"But if it is like that, would it not remain in a disturbed state all the time? Do the tiny people stop fighting?"

"No, it isn't like that. Because mystical entropy is irreversible, the tiny people will fight forever without making up. However, because there are so many of 'the components which establish physical laws' in the surroundings of the tiny people, though there's a time delay, reinforcements eventually pour in. The ratio of 'the components that establish physical laws' will become greater and the physical laws will stabilize."

Suimei took a short breather there, and then continued his explanation.

"When one uses magicka, both components will mix together and the entropy in that place will increase. The amount it increases is in proportion to the scale of the result brought on by the

magicka. When the result brought on by magicka is great, the amount of 'the components that establish mystical laws' born from it will be quite large, after all."

"So magicka that causes a great effect desires more components."

"Yeah. Whether the result brought on by magicka is great or small is decided by just how hard it is to make the same result occur without using magicka. Creating fire is not particularly difficult, but breaking a large rock into very small pieces cannot be done so easily. It is that kind of difference."

"Certainly for more difficult magicka, there are more processes to follow."

"That's right. And with that, entropy will increase. And so the magicka I use compiled from modern magicka theory is the type that increases entropy greatly."

"Modern magicka theory does? Why? You said before, Suimei-dono, that compiling modern magicka theory has fewer processes when compared to magicka from other systems, did you not?"

"Magicka compiled by modern magicka theory, instead of looking to produce the same result as other magicka, looks to speed up its use, reduce the processes involved, and increase the power. The time taken from invocation to activation is shorter than with other magicka. Shortening the required amount of time makes it more difficult, right? Producing the same result in a shorter period of time means that the desired result is greater."

"Ah, I see."

As Felmenia now seemed to understand, Suimei spoke as if summarizing everything he'd said.

"Well, I explained it in fine detail, but it's fine to just remember that when you use magicka, entropy increases. And so, the main topic of today's lesson starts from here..."

Chapter 4: Devil

Late that night in the imperial capital, Suimei, Felmenia, and Liliana were walking around outside. Felmenia, who was sticking close to Suimei, was observing their surroundings and cautiously voiced her concern regarding the apparent unnaturalness of what she saw.

"It is quiet, is it not?"

"They probably anticipated that there would be a fight and evacuated the area beforehand."

Suimei shared his speculation as he looked around himself. Just as Felmenia had said, the streets were perfectly still. There wasn't a soul in sight. Since there was now a curfew on the city, that much was to be expected, but Suimei couldn't even sense the presence of people in the houses around them. And walking down the empty streets, the sound of the cold, crisp nighttime wind carrying their voices and footsteps seemed far louder than usual. Suddenly, Liliana tugged on Suimei's hand.

"Suimei... That."

"They're already showing themselves, huh? That was fast."

There were several moving shadows in the direction Liliana was pointing, which was down a road that led straight to the southern plaza. And sure enough, accompanied by the sound of running footsteps, a lot of soldiers appeared from the darkness.

"Suimei-dono, will you really be alright with just you and Liliana?"

"No problem. The damage to my astral body has recovered well enough for this. All that's left is to catch the target."

As Felmenia and Suimei were talking, the approaching soldiers came to a stop some distance away from them. From what Suimei could see, the soldiers were heavily armed and had come in force. Their rear line was even a squad of mages standing at the ready. But they only stood there for a few moments before parting ranks as Graziella, Elliot, and Christa emerged before them.

"I see everyone came to the party," Suimei said somewhat

flippantly.

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it, Suimei Yakagi. How is your health since then?” Graziella responded.

“Thanks to you, my recovery was delayed. It was quite a pain, honestly. But more importantly, you certainly brought a lot of friends along today, didn’t you?”

“Considering my opponent, I only made suitable preparations.”

“That’s quite a grand assessment.”

“Quit it.”

Graziella spat out her words like she was disappointed at Suimei’s false humility. Next it was Elliot who began speaking.

“To think that you were the one sheltering that girl…”

“Is it surprising?”

“Of course. I never would have thought that the person who was competing with me to find the culprit would be protecting one of the suspects.”

“Well, that’s fair.”

As Suimei unapologetically shrugged his shoulders, Elliot sharpened the gaze of his blue eyes as he looked at him.

“So, why are you doing it?”

“It would take a long time to explain, and I don’t have the time to spell it out for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I’m on my way to catch the mastermind behind the coma incidents.”

Hiding nothing, Suimei had no problem telling them what he was doing. But he heard a snort in response; it seemed Graziella couldn’t hide her displeasure. She wasted no time denouncing his actions.

“How shameless. You yourself are complicit in these crimes, are you not?”

“Even if I said I wasn’t, you aren’t going to listen at all, right?”

“If you already know that much, it should be obvious.”

As Graziella declared this, her black lined gauntlet chinked as she held her hands up at the ready. She was implying that it was about time they start. Her fighting spirit overflowed her body.

“Tonight I will have you thoroughly demonstrate your damned power for me. You only gave me a glimpse last time.”

“Sorry to say it, but that’s not gonna happen.”

“What?”

Seeing that Suimei had no intention of complying, Graziella glared at him with a perturbed and somewhat puzzled expression. As she did, someone casually walked out from the alleyway beside them. It was...

"Well, well, what do we have here? It's been a while, Your Imperial Highness Graziella."

Shana Reiji, the hero of Astel. Elliot in particular looked quite shocked over his unexpected arrival.

"You're..."

"Hmph, Reiji the hero, huh? I heard you came to the imperial capital, but what are you doing walking the streets this late at night?"

"Lately during the day, there are people just absolutely everywhere. It's been quite cramped, so I thought I would cool myself off some by taking a stroll at night when things are quiet. But don't worry—I didn't come alone."

As Reiji spoke, Mizuki, Titania, and their knight escorts came out from behind him.

"Your Royal Highness, what is the meaning of this?"

"I simply followed along after being told that Reiji-sama wanted to go and cool off."

Titania was feigning ignorance the same as Reiji. Graziella sharpened her gaze like a blade as she looked at her. This development was far too convenient. Graziella could sense it was all an act and questioned the lot of them in an oppressive tone.

"What are your intentions here?" she asked.

"Our intentions? We're simply passing by. But on that note, just what are you all doing out here in the middle of the night?" Reiji countered.

"We've come to capture that man, White Flame-dono, and that little girl."

"That sounds serious. What did they do?"

"Surely you've heard of the damned incidents happening in the imperial capital. That little girl is suspected of being the criminal behind them, and that man has been harboring her."

"Is that so? I haven't heard anything about that. How about it, Suimei?" Reiji replied in a deliberately loud voice.

"Who knows? I honestly don't know what she's talking about. We don't have a single clue as to who's responsible for the incidents, after all. Unless... Ah, I see. Is that it? You lot couldn't

produce any results, so to deceive everyone, you're making us out to be the criminals, right?"

"Well, that's no good. No, that simply won't do at all. We can't have that."

Playing along with Suimei, Reiji spoke in an exaggeratedly sympathetic tone. Watching their well coordinated act, Graziella discerned that they were both good friends and that they arranged this all beforehand. She looked extremely annoyed.

"You bastards..."

On the other hand, Elliot seemed to think something was rather funny and was holding back his laughter. He was apparently rather amused to see Graziella so stymied. But on the side, Mizuki and Titania were looking at Suimei and Reiji and sighing in exasperation after witnessing this exchange.

"What can I say? This only looks like two best friends acting perfectly in sync."

"Yes, the two of them are completely shameless..."

And it wasn't just the two of them who thought so. Felmenia and the knights also beheld this spectacle with suspicious eyes. And once their little charade came to an end, Reiji turned his handsome and gallant face towards Graziella.

"I'll say it loud and clear. Your Imperial Highness, as a hero, I cannot abide such tyranny."

"What are you saying? Surely you aren't thinking of fighting us."

"Of course. That is exactly what I was thinking."

Hearing Reiji's declaration, Graziella looked at him skeptically, but composed and unfazed.

Her demeanor indicated she had no intention of backing down. Reiji drew his orichalcum sword from its sheath. The blade shone with a luster like the afterglow of burning metal, and a metal noise almost like a buzzing in one's ears rang through the air.

"My deepest apologies, princess, but until they capture the mastermind, I cannot let you proceed. If you insist on doing so no matter what..."

"Hmph. Then we'll have to do so with force, is that it? Will you be the one keeping me company, then?"

"No, Your Imperial Highness's opponent will be me," Felmenia said as she stepped forward.

"White Flame-dono will? Hmph, that in itself also seems

interesting. You certainly served me my fill the other day, after all."

Graziella flashed a fearless smile towards Felmenia's challenge. Though she didn't let it show, Felmenia faltered slightly.

"Erk..."

"It's alright. You've got this, Menia," Suimei whispered to her.

"Y-Yes!"

Encouraged by his words, Felmenia regained her confidence. A fire lit in her amber eyes as she proudly stuck out her chest. Titania, Mizuki, and the knights then dispersed. Falling behind them, Suimei and Liliana moved on towards their destination by cutting through the back alley.

★

After separating from Felmenia and the others by retreating down an alley, Suimei and Liliana were now running down a different street en route to their target using magicka to sprint far beyond the capabilities of any ordinary human.

"Suimei... are you sure about this?"

"Yeah, there's no mistaking it."

Suimei was certain of the identity of the culprit. He could think of no other possibility. Based on everything that had happened so far, based on the far too convenient circumstances and the information Felmenia had gathered, Suimei was headed to the Imperial University Library. He'd find his answer there. At the speed they were running through the stillness of the night, a structure taller than anything else around came into sight.

"That's... weird."

"It's a type of spell that clears away unwanted people by making them drowsy. It's set up so that the people who wander into this area will get sleepy and go back the way they came."

"It is like a thinly spread dark veil of stupor... right?"

While listening to Liliana's conjecture, Suimei approached the entrance and opened the doors to the library. Greeted by the darkness within that felt like it would suck him in, Suimei threw himself in of his own will. He was getting the feeling that the end was in sight.

The only light he could rely on to illuminate his way was the moonlight shining down through the skylight. Inside the building, everything was far too quiet. It made Suimei think of the dead

silence that fell right before the appearance of a haunting spirit.

Liliana anxiously cuddled up next to Suimei for comfort and safety. As he gently stroked her head, he took a good look around the area. None of the employees were present, which was to be expected at this hour. None of them but one. Sensing someone's arrival, a light came on deep within the darkness of the library. A man with fair skin, long ears, and glasses appeared.

"Are you looking to use our facilities? I'm afraid the library is closed for the evening."

It was the male elf named Romeon, one of the librarians of the Imperial University Library. And when he realized it was Suimei who'd come in, he looked quite surprised.

"Oh? Yakagi-kun and... If it isn't Lord Zandyke's daughter. If you're here at this hour... is something wrong?"

Suimei made no attempt to conceal anything and plainly stated his intentions.

"I just thought I'd come and arrest the culprit behind the coma incidents."

"Oh...? The culprit behind the coma incidents, you say? Then certainly you know that girl you brought along is rumored to be the criminal."

"Publicly, at least. However, the truth is that there was someone behind even that. A mastermind who used magic on Liliana and manipulated her."

"My goodness... But this is the library, you know?"

Romeon pretended to look around the area as he spoke as if to imply there was no way such a person was there. But Suimei didn't falter and didn't back down.

"Exactly. And the mastermind is right here."

"Right here? Whatever do you mean?"

"If it's just us and you standing here, then there's only one answer, right?"

Hearing those words, Romeon flashed an astonished expression before bursting into laughter like he'd heard a bad joke.

"You couldn't possibly be saying that I'm the criminal, right?"

"Unfortunately, that's exactly what I'm saying."

"No way, Yakagi-kun. Think about it. There is no way I would do something so outrageous, is there?"

"When the bad guy says that kind of thing, it doesn't really hold a lot of water, you know?"

A troubled smile floated on Romeon's face as Suimei asserted himself. He then reined himself in and pushed his glasses up as he adjusted their position on his nose. He was as calm as ever, but the friendly demeanor he'd had up until now vanished.

"Hmph... You sound quite confident. What basis do you have to believe that I am the criminal?"

"I have plenty of reasons."

"If you do, may I ask what they are?"

"What first tipped me off was that time I came here with Menia," Suimei began.

"...You mean the time I talked with you about dark magic? Treating me like a criminal just from that is what we call imprudence."

Before Suimei could finish explaining, Romeon took a guess as to what Suimei was implying and, with a tedious sigh, began defending himself.

"Is it not hasty to decide that I am the criminal just because I know about dark magic? There are people all over the world who know of the existence of dark magic, you know?"

"Listen, I wouldn't treat you like a criminal just because you know a thing or two about dark magic. Like you said, there are plenty of people in this world who do."

"Then..."

"But that wasn't all you talked with us about that day."

"Then you mean something else?"

Romeon made a puzzled face like he had no idea what Suimei was talking about.

"Those words used to strengthen dark magic."

"...Now that I think about, I do remember mentioning something like that. The words the criminal appended to the end of their spells were savage names, right? But what of it? Do you find me suspicious just because I know of savage names?"

"That's right. After talking with Liliana about it, it seems they're something she learned from the real mastermind behind the incidents."

"So just because I know savage names too, I must be the criminal? Is that any different from judging someone on the basis that they know dark magic?" Romeon said with a grand sigh. "Yakagi-kun, will you stop this already? If you do, I will forget all about this."

As he spoke, Romeon's voice returned to its usual amicable tone and he put on a troubled smile once more. The man proposing to ignore everything as nonsense certainly did appear to be harmless.

"Okay, Mr. Librarian, there's just a teensy little thing that I'd like to confirm. How did you explain it to us at that time? That's all I want to know. Could you remind me once more?"

Astonished at Suimei's question, Romeon again sighed in an irritated fashion and answered ambiguously.

"Savage names are words used in this world since ancient times to strengthen dark magic. They have been long lost, but they amplify the power of darkness. Needless to say, anyone struck by such strengthened dark magic would suffer serious harm. What—"

"It's that. That's the part that's strange."

"..."

As Suimei suddenly identified what was bothering him, Romeon went quiet before pointing a sharp gaze at Suimei and questioning the source of his doubt.

"I do not understand what you're trying to say, Yakagi-kun. What about what I said is strange? Surely this isn't because of some turn of phrase..."

"Before we go any further, let me just come out and say that I'm not from this world. I was a bonus that came with the hero who was summoned in Astel."

Hearing Suimei's declaration, a bit of surprise flashed across Romeon's face. But he then nodded in acknowledgment.

"Now that you mention it, there were rumors of an accident around the time of the hero summoning in Astel. However, I believe that has no bearing on our conversation, does it?"

"That's not quite true. It has a surprising connection to what we're talking about."

"A connection...?"

"That's right. Those words are one of the mystical figures of speech from our world."

Hearing Suimei's explanation, Romeon's composure vanished and his expression turned grim.

"I don't know what conclusion you're drawing from all that, but it's not a given that they're something that only exists in your world, is it? Just as different worlds can have the same technologies, those savage names could be born in different worlds."

“That’s true. It isn’t all that unlikely that the same concept was born in this world. However, unfortunately, that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

“On what grounds? You couldn’t possibly be saying that you found the origin of savage names in this world, could you?”

“Nope, I don’t need to go to all that trouble.”

Romeon’s irritation was piling up counter to Suimei’s mounting insight. He was starting to get restless. While dusting a nearby chair with his finger, his tone turned sharp.

“Why is that?”

Suimei let out a laugh, knowing Romeon already knew the answer to the question he was asking.

“I mean, for a while now, you’ve been saying ‘nomina barbara, nomina barbara’ repeatedly using the language from our world.”

“…”

Hearing those words, Romeon’s expression grew even more grim. He began to open his mouth like he had an objection, but Suimei ignored him and continued cutting forward with his words.

“Normally, the people brought to this world by the magicka circle used for hero summoning hear the language of this world in their own native language. But it’s not like you people are actually speaking our language. You’re still speaking in your own native tongue. So if what you said was true and the concept of savage names existed in this world natively, the words I heard you say should have been magically translated into Japanese and the way your mouth moved when you said it should have been new to me. But I remember thinking there was something odd about it. Something familiar. Which leads me to believe only one thing.”

“Ah… That’s why at that time… you asked me if I heard ‘nomina barbara,’ right?”

Liliana spoke up as she came to an understanding. Suimei had specifically asked her about that while they were discussing the mastermind behind the incidents. All this time he had been referring to savage names in Japanese, but he wanted to confirm he got the same results when saying it in Latin.

“That’s right. And because it’s something from my world and not here, I was actually hearing what you were saying rather than a translation. Which means that it’s rather strange for you to know about it, doesn’t it?”

Confronted with this, Romeon replied by pointing out that there

were holes in Suimei's logic.

"Even so, that doesn't implicitly mean that I am the criminal, does it? Heroes have been summoned to this world since ancient times. It is not impossible to think that a hero came from your world long ago and passed on the knowledge of savage names, leading to its usage here, right?"

Suimei listlessly scratched the back of his head as he heard this.

"Yeah, about that... I have something I'd like to ask you. Exactly how long ago was the last time a hero was summoned to this world?"

"..."

"I don't know if you actually know or not, but if you don't want to say it, I'll tell you myself. Based on my and Menia's investigations, the last time a hero was summoned seems to have been over one hundred years ago. Of course, anything related to hero summoning is strictly controlled by the Church of Salvation and Mage's Guild, so there's no such thing as an off-the-record summoning."

Romeon remained silent as Suimei spoke, and Suimei moved into his endgame with this conversation.

"Savage names first became a thing in our world during an age called the Crowley era. That was approximately one hundred years ago. But the first time it took a form that could actually be used was when Kenneth Grant fully established the concept fifty years or so ago. See? With that, your little theory is out the window." Suimei then shrugged his shoulders like he was stumped by something. "There remains the question of why savage names are even in this world, but... Well, whatever. The important thing right now is that someone aside from myself and Liliana who knows of a concept that shouldn't exist in this world is present in the imperial capital."

"..."

Romeon cast his eyes downward. Just what emotions was he hiding behind those glasses? Suimei had no idea what he was thinking without being able to see his face. However, deciding it was too soon to back off, Suimei continued chasing Romeon into a corner.

"It's about time you stop playing dumb, Mr. Librarian. From what I've heard, you came to the imperial capital just as the coma incidents began, didn't you? Isn't that a bit of an extraordinary coincidence?"

Romeon still didn't capitulate.

"Do you have any proof?"

"Not at all. Before I could put the last nail in the coffin, I was forced to make my move."

Suimei confessed that he was one move away from perfection. But even without that, he wasn't at a disadvantage. After all...

"Well, I'm not a detective. I don't have any evidence that strongly points to you. All I have is just speculation. And it's easy enough to point out the problems with that, which won't do. However, even though I'm not a detective, I'm a magician. In my world, there are techniques to forcefully extract another person's memories, you see. So..."

In the blink of an eye, Suimei donned his black suit—his battle uniform. Highlighting that he was no ordinary person, his crimson eyes lit ablaze.

"If we cut out the talking, that way would be much faster."

With the circumstantial evidence mounting against him, even without definitive proof, there was no mistaking that this elf was the criminal. All that was necessary to confirm it would be to see if he was the one that manipulated Liliana.

After a while, Suimei could hear clapping. With his gaze still cast downward, Romeon was putting his hands together for Suimei like he was praising him for finding the criminal. Grasping this as a form of admittance, Liliana regarded Romeon with a bewildered expression.

"Mr. Librarian... you're..."

"My goodness, to think that Yakagi-kun was someone summoned from another world... That was completely outside my expectations."

"That time you told us about savage names here in the library, and that time you came to warn us in the alley... You did all that to try and keep us away from the incident, right?"

"Yes, that's right. You're the person who endured Liliana's strengthened dark magic, and despite still bearing those severe wounds, you fought Her Imperial Highness Graziella on even grounds. If possible, I didn't want to face you myself. But I never expected it to backfire on me in such a way."

"Then the one... who gave my location to those guild mages... and also leaked it to the army..."

"Yes, it's just as you guessed. It was me."

Liliana looked at Romeon with fear as she questioned him further.

“Why... did you... use me?”

“No particular reason. It was just that I also found those nobles that you wanted to do something about to be hindrances. Moreover, above all else, you hold the power of darkness.”

As Romeon spoke, the power of darkness, the pent-up resentment pulled from the outside world, swelled up rapidly. It seemed this man was also able to use dark magic himself. Before long, the dimly lit library behind him was dyed pitch black. The power hovering in the background began to stiffen and take form.

“Even though things may appear this way, I have researched the power of darkness for quite some time. Just recently, I was curious what would happen to a being that the rich power of darkness sympathized with, and was just in the middle of investigating it.”

Sensing what Romeon was hinting at, Suimei clicked his tongue with a displeased look on his face.

“And because of that, savage names came up, huh?”

“Exactly. Using savage names, the power of darkness is amplified, including the power of its influence. Especially for Liliana, who the darkness sympathized strongly with already. It could be said that she was the ideal vessel to carry out both my experiments and my goal behind the incidents.”

“No... way...”

Hearing Romeon’s inhuman confession, Liliana was deeply shocked. Far more than she thought she would be. Her shaking hands were firmly clinging to Suimei, who shot a scornful glare are Romeon.

“Good grief. I already thought you were quite the lowlife, but to think it was to this extent...”

“For a mage, the pursuit of knowledge is a simple matter of course. You are also a mage, are you not? You should be able to understand.”

“Hmph. Don’t lump me in with scum like you. I would never go so far in pursuing the truth that I stray from the path.”

“There’s no need to hide it. You must have also wanted to know what kind of monster someone who the power of darkness sympathized with would become, didn’t you? You wanted to know, right? Don’t you just tremble with excitement thinking about it?

HAHAHAHAHA!”

Romeon’s laughing voice became jarring to the ears after being tainted by the power of darkness. Behind him, the power that was manifesting thanks to Romeon was sluggishly swaying as it appeared and disappeared... He was already preparing the space required to summon a sinful figure. Suimei wasn’t sure, however, if that was his intention or not. As if it was his last question, Suimei called out to Romeon in a definitive tone.

“So in the end, what did you hope to accomplish by studying the power of darkness?”

“It’s obvious! If I’m able to further clarify just what dark magic is, I can save those who are struggling with the power of darkness even now! That’s why I want to know the depths of the power of darkness! I want to pursue it! I will take hold of that power!”

“Huh...?”

A bewildered expression floated onto Liliana’s face as she heard Romeon’s completely contradictory explanation. He wanted to save people who were suffering. Within the twisted laughter warped by the power of darkness, that desire certainly existed. There was no mistaking that he pursued the mystery for that reason, but what he was doing now was completely counter to his original desire. He’d taken the wrong route to get there.

Using his own mana as bait, Romeon was expanding the power of darkness. His sense of reason had weakened. This was a man at the end of the road after living only to fulfill one purpose, and breaking down in the process. In stark contrast to before, Suimei now looked at him with eyes full of pity.

“I see. You’re one of the guys who lost, huh?”

Magicians pursued the truth; they were those who desired the truth following their own ideals. However, there are those who spent too long chasing after their own ideals. Following that path, they would touch upon many mysteries, and as they did, they would be affected by them. Gradually, their sense of self would become weaker and weaker. This must have been exaggerated in the case of an elf who naturally had a long lifespan. The man who was currently enthralled by malice may very well have started on the right path.

“Now come! The two of you will be covered in sin and die right here!”

Romeon sentenced them to death in a revelrous voice. The

sound of mana pouring out of him took on a wicked roar as it blew violently. Suddenly, one of the bookshelves on the second floor took flight like it had been ejected by an explosion. Cutting an arc through the air, it slammed right into Romeon on the floor below it. However, obstructed by the darkness coiling around him, the large object did nothing against him. The bookshelves and the books within it were obliterated and sent flying as Romeon shouted in the direction they'd come from.

"Who's there?!"

A shadow appeared from the second floor.

"...I never would have thought it would be something like this."

Kicking down the railing on the second floor, the one quietly muttering from above was Rogue Zandyke. Suimei had no idea how long he'd been there. Even as a magician, he was unable to sense his presence in this place. Overflowing with fighting spirit, he swept open his military coat and turned his reddish-brown eyes on Romeon like a blade.

"Colonel...?"

Liliana looked at him in surprise. Romeon, as expected, was still brimming with excitement.

"Well, well, if it isn't Lord Zandyke. Just what are you doing here at this hour?"

"I was chasing the two of them, and arrived here in pursuit... I heard everything you talked about."

"Oh, is that so? You have my condolences. You see, the number of people that must die here just increased by one."

Romeon pronounced death on them all. He had no intention of allowing anyone to leave this place alive. Glancing down at the source of the ominous laughter, Rogue drew his sword. And looking up at Rogue, Liliana rushed to his side.

"Liliana, fall back."

"Colonel!"

Liliana pleaded with him, but Rogue was not listening to her at all. He jumped down from the second floor and called out to Suimei.

"Suimei Yakagi, I will support you."

"...I look forward to working with you."

As Suimei replied to Rogue, Romeon readied the power of darkness, preparing to mow them down.

"So what if your numbers increase by one or two?!"

The tables and chairs in the area were sent flying, shattering into pieces with a wave of darkness. Romeon hid himself behind a nearby bookshelf as Suimei, Liliana, and their new companion Rogue took cover in separate directions.

"What's wrong?! Weren't you going to capture me?!"

Bolstered by his belief in the strength of the power of darkness, Romeon's movements were sluggish. He poked his head out from cover and emerged. He then began approaching at a relaxed pace, looking as if he was trying to decide what prey he was going to start with first. A voice then called out to Suimei out of nowhere.

"Suimei Yakagi, can you hear me?"

Suimei could hear Rogue's voice being carried by the wind. It seemed to be magic to talk at a distance. Suimei used magicka to reply in kind.

"I can hear you. What's wrong?"

"I have a question. What is the power that elf is using? It is far too powerful for just the attribute of darkness."

"No, it's exactly that. But because it's far too strong, he'll end up summoning an evil existence from another plane. That's why the source of the power behind the darkness attribute is flowing out in its pure form."

"Then I presume it's bad to come into contact with it?"

"As long as it isn't prolonged contact, it should be fine. But in the end, it's a mass of malice and resentment born of the human heart. I can't endorse fighting while standing around in it."

"Then it will have to come down to striking once, getting some distance, and repeating..."

"I'll be going first."

As Suimei said this, Liliana called out to him from the side.

"Suimei, that's... a dreadful amount of power."

"Liliana, it'll still be easy for that thing to suck you in. Be careful."

With that warning, Suimei leaped out from his cover. Catching this with his eyes, Romeon immediately swung his arm and fired the power of darkness at Suimei. However, his aim was poor and it only damaged more of the library. Suimei then put his strike magicka into action. A delightful snapping sound rang in the air repeatedly as the area around Romeon exploded.

"A smoke screen, huh?"

Suimei's intention was exactly as Romeon said. And as if he'd

been waiting for that, Rogue fired off wind magic that sucked a great deal of books into the air. Romeon defended against the incoming wind, but Rogue soared in, concealing himself among the books. After closing the distance between them in an instant, Rogue let out a backwards slash. But Romeon made no effort to avoid it; he simply used the power of darkness wrapped around his arm to mow down the attack.

"Tch..."

Being struck by the power of darkness directly would be bad. Knowing better, Rogue jumped backwards in a panic.

"Mea acies est facta invisibilis, sed est instar adamantinum acre, et demergit meus inimicum in sanguis."

[My blade is invisibly made, however with sharpness like steel, it drowns my enemy in a pool of blood.]

Covering Rogue's retreat, Suimei fired off his magicka. A countless number of invisible slashes flew towards Romeon, and the power of darkness chasing after Rogue was cut to pieces. Seeing the power of Suimei's magicka, Romeon then took a step back.

"As expected, with one of the Seven Swords and Yakagi-kun as opponents, I'm at a disadvantage... However..."

Romeon began chanting a spell. Matching his timing, Suimei also began chanting.

"Oh Darkness. Thou art the one who swallows all existence. Drape thyself in jet black gruesomeness. With that indefinite appearance, grant death—an avoidable death—before me! Olgo, Lucuila, Ragua, Secunto, Labielalu, Baybaron!"

"O flammae, legito. Pro venefici doloris clamore. Parito colluctatione et aestuato! Eva, Zurdick, Rozeia, Deivikusd, Reianima!"

[Oh flames, assemble. Like the cry of the magician's resentment. Give form to death's agony and burst into flames! Eva, Zurdick, Rozeia, Deivikusd, Reianima!]

Suimei and Romeon's chants completely overlapped. On one hand was dark magic, and on the other was fire magicka. What they had in common were the strange, unknown words they both appended to the end of the chants.

"Dark Embrace!"

"Conluceto! O Ashurbanipalis fulgidus lapillus!"

[Shine! Oh Ashurbanipal's dazzling gem!]

Suimei and Romeo activated their keywords simultaneously.

The darkness born behind Romeon rushed forward and swallowed everything in its path, spreading out like a large wave. Suimei crushed the shining flame in the palm of his hand as explosive flames crowded around Romeon. Within the library that was shaking with a thunderous roar, the dazzling flames incinerated the power of darkness to nothing as the fire continued to surge towards Romeon unimpeded.

Romeon took a defensive stance to protect himself as the excessive, vigorous flames burst through the walls of the library. Fearing another attack from Suimei, Romeon leaped outside through one of the freshly made holes.

"Urgh... Impossible! How is it that you who does not hold the power of darkness can use savage names?!"

Suimei exited the library the same way in pursuit of Romeon and snapped his fingers at Romeon, forcing him to retreat further back into a vacant plot of land. Suimei strode forward with composure, stepping out from the darkness underneath the moonlight.

"The names of gods are in and of themselves a strong power. Since ancient times, many magicians had attempted to make use of that power for magicka. But gods from another plane of existence have names that are completely unpronounceable to humans. And even if they could speak them, they're too powerful for humans to use. Savage names—words that hold tremendous power by bringing down the names of gods—are something that can enhance the effect of any magicka. Primitive names."

"Wha—?"

"Savage names do more than just strengthen dark magic. I have no idea what conclusions you came to while studying them, but it seems you got it wrong."

Nomina barbara were capable of far more than increasing the effectiveness of dark magic. By bringing down the name of gods to the level of human speech, their significance was akin to the howl of a beast to humans. They held a great, primal power that could be applied to any magicka.

"So what if it can be used for other magic?! If you are also able to use savage names, then I only need to apply savage names to an even more powerful magic!"

After screaming, Romeon once more began chanting a spell. And seeing this, Suimei let out an exasperated declaration.

“If one makes use of savage names, the effectiveness of the magicka is certainly increased. But magicka that uses them becomes bland, and there’s no way to fully control it. So it has its disadvantages. That’s why...”

“Oh Darkness. Thou art more powerful than any of the eight attributes. The destruction that thou dost bring about will give birth to absolute despair! Olgo, Lucuila, Ragua, Secunto, Labielalu, Baybaron! Black Ruin!”

“O mysteria. Subito depravato id axioma.”

[Oh mysteries. Quickly distort that principle.]

At the same time Romeon activated his keyword, Suimei recited a chant with incredible speed. When he did, a change came over the dark spell Romeon was casting. The enormous sphere of darkness taking shape in front of him suddenly lost its form and popped right where it was.

“Ugh! I-Impossible! What the hell... just happened?”

With the spell bursting in front of him, Romeon was struck directly by its power and staggered. Since it was his own power, the damage wasn’t terribly severe, but the shock to his spirit from his use of savage names was considerable. Liliana, who was watching the fight from behind Suimei, realized what was happening and spoke up with a surprised expression plastered to her face.

“That was... when I...”

“Phenomenon Mixer. At the point in time where it’s determined a physical phenomenon will occur, it contains the potentiality of all the events that could possibly occur, along with their processes and results. Things will flow naturally from there towards the most probable outcome, which is what will come to be. But when a mystical phenomenon becomes involved, then that outcome becomes unstable. When applied correctly, you can use that mystical law to your advantage, especially against bland magicka that can’t be properly controlled.”

Using fundamentals of magicka theory, Suimei had used the confrontation between magickal forces to destabilize the result of the spell. The magic that Liliana used against Suimei’s magicka once before made use of the same principle. It was a technique that manipulated a spell with one that had similar components. It would destabilize the outcome to the advantage of the interloping mage.

“Give it up, Mr. Librarian. You—who cannot use powerful magic without relying on savage names—have no chance of

winning, right?"

Suimei was declaring that his victory was inevitable. In response, Romeon's shoulders drooped like he was giving up. But to the contrary, he had no intention of surrendering.

"...Then I guess I don't have a choice. I didn't want to have to do this..."

As he muttered to himself, Romeon once more began radiating dark energy, but this was far more powerful than before. Also, unlike before, Romeon acted without regard for his own safety or being. He let himself be swallowed entirely by malice, and his body transformed into something monstrous. His elven silhouette was now nothing more than a black shadow with an eye and mouth attached to it. It was just like the sinful figure... No, it was more like the sinister being that was its original form.

"It was the same when I came here, but somehow this is always the general pattern..."

Watching the black monster come into being before him, Suimei could only look on in a bit of astonishment at Romeon's withered spirit. Certainly when people found themselves at a disadvantage, it was normal for them to call on tremendous power. But seeing where that had taken Romeon—the monstrous form he'd taken that was no longer human—Liliana worriedly called out to Suimei.

"Suimei!"

"That's the fate of those who are swallowed by the darkness. Look closely and burn that image into your mind, Liliana," Suimei warned.

"Suimei Yakagi. You seem awfully calm, but do you have a spell to defeat that thing?"

"Wha...?! Where did you pop out from?"

"What? I just came through that hole like everyone else."

Hearing Rogue say that as though it were completely trivial, Suimei began to realize just how frightening this man standing next to him was. He had no idea whatsoever when Rogue had appeared. Suimei figured he'd probably come up to him while he was talking to Liliana, but he couldn't say for sure. It was entirely possible that Rogue had been standing there the entire time. But since there were more pressing matters at hand, Suimei collected his thoughts and turned back to Romeon.

"...It'll take a bit of time, but I have magicka that can defeat it."

“Very well. Then I will buy you the time you need.”

Leaving the rest to Suimei, the imperial swordsman turned away and dashed towards their mutual opponent. Suimei only had words of praise for his fighting style. Avoiding the waves of dark power Romeon was throwing around, Rogue kept up his own offensive without getting in Suimei’s way.

“Scurrying around like a pest!”

An irritated voice that grated their ears filled the air, and Rogue’s figure suddenly disappeared from sight. He was still fighting, but all that could be seen of him was a blur. Once in a while, he would appear here or there with a surge of tremendous fighting spirit. It was like a mirage, except instead of coming from the heat, he appeared to be emerging from his very own shadow. It was the special technique of one of the Seven Swords, the one known as the Sword Master of the Lonely Shadow. It was an exquisite skill that made his existence difficult for others to detect or comprehend. He’d boldly carried out many an assassination with the help of those mirages. This was nothing new to him. He appeared to be in his element, and quite safe from Romeon’s attacks. That left Suimei free to chant without worry. For a moment, he even looked up towards the stars.

“Intra velum. Noctis lacrimarum potestas. Insigne Olympus et terrae pingito. Infestato ad irrationabilis veritas. Caecato, pluvia incessabilis. Ea qui lugent sunt vitium. Ea qui fatentur sunt bonitas. Omne perveniunt ex luce supra tumultum, ex coruscis stellis.”

[Beneath the curtain. The majesty of the tears shed by the night. Colored by the symbol of heaven and earth. Infest towards the irrational truth. Dazzle, incessant rain. Those who lament are evil. Those who confess are virtuous. Everything comes from that light beyond the chaos, from the twinkling stars.]

In the midst of chanting his spell, Suimei could hear Romeon’s laughing voice. That broken, loud laughter was proof of Romeon’s consciousness weakening. It was a mad, maniacal cackling. He believed that he would be victorious beyond a shadow of a doubt...

However, even this blinded man would soon come to see. An enormous magicka circle covered the sky. Its dazzling glint that shone down on them took form from the starlight in the heavens. Yes, he would come to see the radiance of hope.

Before long, everyone aside from Romeon fell dead silent as the moonlight vanished. Sensing the great power in the heavens, Rogue

retreated from the front line. Liliana, who was standing behind Suimei, was completely ignoring Romeon as she stared into the sky above completely dumbfounded. Then even the sky itself became unseeable as a countless number of comets took form.

"Enth Astrarle!"

[Oh starry sky, fall!]

With Suimei's keyword, the imperial capital was swallowed by the light of the torrent of raining stars. In the bath of astral light, all evil that was present and all spells that had authored it were reduced to nothing. When the radiance finally died down and the vacant lot fell dark once more, the withered figure of Romeon lay motionless on the ground. Suimei drew nearer to the body of the man that had once been the librarian and reached out to touch it. Rogue sheathed his sword as he walked over as well.

"Is he dead?'

"He's alive. But not..."

Romeon was indeed alive, but after being swallowed by malice and then by the brilliance of astral light, it was a petty distinction. His heart was still beating, but he could not think, much less move. The moment he'd taken in that malice like a breath of fresh air, his fate was sealed. As such, Liliana was puzzled when Suimei began using magicka on him.

"What... are you doing?"

"Hmm? Oh, there's just a little something I want to examine."

When he was done, Suimei let go of Romeon. Liliana then turned to Rogue.

"Colonel..."

Liliana's left eye was filled with sorrow and anxiety, but nevertheless, she called out to Rogue like she still had lingering affection for him. Rogue turned his back on her. And then, as expected, he spoke in a cold tone.

"Liliana, you should go along with that man."

"Colonel, that's... What do you...?"

Following up on Liliana's bewilderment, Suimei raised a question of his own.

"What about taking responsibility?"

"Liliana was being manipulated by that man, right? In that case, there is no such responsibility for her to take."

Rogue's tone was severe as usual, but the words he spoke in that stern voice were completely unexpected to Suimei. Deep down,

Rogue must have never wanted to kill Liliana in the first place.

"Then what do you intend by telling her to go with me?"

"Nothing more than what I said. It just means I will leave Liliana in your care."

"But Liliana is your..."

Before Suimei could finish, Rogue shook his head as if he didn't want Suimei to say it.

"No. I have no right to stay by that child's side after trying to kill her with my own hands."

Hearing that, Liliana yelled out to him in a flustered voice.

"C-Colonel! I don't... really..."

"Liliana, this is my way of taking responsibility. Instead of believing you, I betrayed you. I don't have any right to call myself a parent anymore."

Liliana was at a loss for words as she listened to Rogue denounce himself.

"It is not something that I should be saying, but I feel it would be alright to entrust you to the one who protected you until the end."

And with that, Rogue turned away from them both and started walking. Suimei saw loneliness in his uniform-clad figure as it moved further away. He then called out to Rogue once more.

"Where are you going?"

"I have a duty to attend to."

In the face of Rogue's tragic determination, Suimei sank into silence. Rogue, with his back still turned, then continued.

"Suimei Yakagi... I may not be in a position to say such a thing anymore, but... please, take care of that child."

There was nothing Suimei could do to stop him. Any objection he raised, even if he shouted, would only pale in the face of Rogue's stalwart resolve. So instead, Suimei simply nodded and said that he understood. He could see the faintest smile on Rogue's stiff face as he glanced back over his shoulder. He then began walking off into the distance again.

"Colonel!"

A young voice chased after him as he left, but it didn't stop him. Contrary to the young girl's desires, he never looked back. He simply pressed forward to face his own responsibilities. But just as he didn't stop walking, Liliana didn't stop calling for him.

"Colonel! Wait, please wait..."

Liliana fell to her knees as she watched Rogue's figure grow smaller in the distance. But because she understood how Rogue felt, she was unable to follow after him. But she couldn't just let him go. Her attachment to him wouldn't permit it. And so she raised her head. She mustered all of her courage, and...

"D... Da... Dad!"

It must have been the first time she ever called him that. As her voice tugged at his paternal heartstrings, Rogue stopped in his tracks. Liliana's voice was calling him—her father. But slowly, surely, he put one foot in front of the other again. He didn't even allow himself to look back. It was as if to say this would be his punishment.

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The conflict between Felmenia's party and Graziella's, which started in the city streets, had moved all the way to the imperial capital's northern plaza and fallen into a deadlock. Currently, the battlefield was split into northern and southern sides, and was nothing more than a volley of spells shot from either side. Felmenia was the one who'd started firing first, but Mizuki and Titania joined in with magic of their own shortly thereafter, and that was how things had reached this stage. Everyone aside from Reiji and Elliot was keeping their distance from that invisible line in the middle of the plaza as they fought.

The plaza resounded with choruses of chanting and bursts of destructive explosions. The laid brickwork was shattered to pieces here and there, sending shards of bricks into the air. The darkness of the night was illuminated by the scattered embers left over from the burning fire magic. In the midst of soldiers and mages flinging all kinds of spell at each other, Titania hurled orders at the knights.

"Keep firing, everyone! Do not relent! Luka, take care of defensive magic! Roffrey, aim for the front line!"

Evading and defending against the incoming spells repeatedly while inching forward ever so steadily, Titania urged her troops to advance. Firing a spell of her own, Mizuki drew nearer to Titania.

"Tia! Are you sure you don't want me defending?!"

"Please leave that part to us! Just keep doing as you have been, Mizuki! Keep using your fire magic spells to break up their formation!"

“Okay!”

Following Titania’s command, Mizuki gave a confident nod and once more began tossing fire spells towards the enemy soldiers. Although, as one would expect, she could not help but restrain herself so that she wouldn’t hit any of them directly. Similarly, the enemy soldiers and mages were refusing to use wide-area spells due to Titania’s presence. But because they knew of Titania’s abilities as one of the Seven Swords, no one was anxious to advance on her and enter combat either. And on top of all that, the knights gathered around her formed a firm defensive shell to protect her.

In the midst of everything, water magic came flying at Mizuki, who was still slinging fire magic at the enemy.

“Whoa!”

Mizuki dodged the aqua bullet and immediately looked in the direction it had flown in from. Elliot’s attendant Christa had separated from him and set Mizuki in her sights. And it was only a matter of seconds before she began chanting another spell.

“Oh Water! Thou art a savage mass of liquid that shall fire forth. Aqua Bullet!”

“Oh Wind! Thou shall become a firm shield to protect me! Repel everything before that severe vortex! Vortex Obstacle!”

To defend herself from the many water bullets flying towards her, Mizuki chanted a protective spell. Air from all directions poured in to form a vortex in front of her. As the water bullets met the vortex, they were dispersed and flung away. However, Christa paid it no mind and showed no hesitation in unleashing another barrage of watery bullets.

“W-Wait! How dare you fire so many at me?!”

“You should expect no less! I am one of El Meide’s high-ranking magic priests—Wha?!”

As Christa was in the middle of responding to Mizuki’s complaint, Mizuki fired off a flaming spell without any chant that evaporated all of the water bullets at once. The flames splendidly exploded as they slammed against the ground.

“Sorry! I can’t really go easy against strong people!”

“As one would expect of a companion for the hero of salvation, you are quite capable.”

“Yeah! Thanks for the compliment.”

The two girls exchanged praise on the battlefield like admiring rivals. Looking at them, Titania let out an exasperated sigh during a

spare moment between chants.

"Why did they get so friendly...?"

Really, it was only Mizuki. Felmenia and Graziella's fight showed no sign of reaching a conclusion as they matched each other offense for defense in the ebb and flow of battle. Graziella's earth magic fired forth from the south end of the plaza, and Felmenia met it with magic of her own. As she chanted her spell, a magicka circle rose from her feet, the light of which constructed a wall of mana around her. Not a second later, the tsunami of earth and sand Graziella sent over assaulted her. But after it settled down, Felmenia was standing there completely unharmed.

"As expected of the White Flame Felmenia-dono. This level of magic is absolutely nothing to you, is it?"

"Of course not. I am still the mage representing Astel, after all."

Felmenia boasted fearlessly in a bid to cheer herself on. At present, her battle with Graziella consisted mainly of her defending against the magic Graziella was firing off without end, like she was trying to restrain Felmenia from advancing at all. Even though Graziella specialized in hand to hand combat, she wasn't driving this battle into close range. If she did so carelessly, she would end up with her back exposed to one of the Seven Swords, after all. Though Titania herself had no intention of using a sword in this fight, nobody had any way of knowing it.

Moreover, in the center of the battlefield, Reiji and Elliot were having their own fight without turning to look at any of the magic flying around in their vicinity. If anyone carelessly entered melee and got caught up in their fight, they may end up creating a major opening for their opponent. As such, everyone else was hesitating to get closer to fight.

Felmenia shot out magicka with a short chant.

"Oh Fire! Soar!"

"It's been nothing but magic without any feeling all this time..."

Watching Felmenia casting yet another spell to restrain her, Graziella voiced her disappointment. Felmenia had only been attacking halfheartedly all this time. Graziella must have felt like she wasn't even in a fight at all. Her body was in a state where it was filled to the brim with mana as she received Felmenia's flame head on. It struck her directly, but despite the fact that she didn't even put up a defensive spell, not even her clothes were so much as singed.

As I suspected, with this level of magicka, there is no effect at all on Her Imperial Highness, I see...

Felmenia was weighing the situation. She was trying to figure out what level of power was required to make Graziella serious. And as she'd expected, simply trying to hold her at bay wouldn't do the trick.

Then it is about time...

In preparation to play her ace, Felmenia turned her attention to Reiji and Elliot. What she was concentrating on was not how their battle was unfolding, however. It was Elliot's magicka.

★

What resounded in the air was not the sound of metal clashing violently against metal, but something more akin to the clear clanging of a metallophone. Their swords were striking against each other, certainly, but all anyone could hear was a high-pitched buzzing in their ears. In the plaza filled with the chaotic sounds of rampant destruction, it was the one that lingered the longest in the air. Naturally, the only ones engaged in such combat—jumping around the battlefield with swords—were Reiji and Elliot.

Only the two heroes were fighting in the middle of the magical volleys without concern for the division of the plaza into north and south sides. Reiji was in his uniform with his sleeves rolled up, while Elliot had already donned his armor and was perfectly prepared for battle.

Suddenly, Elliot cast aside his shield and took his sword in both hands. With that, he stopped Reiji's incoming blade. Reiji wasn't sure what he was thinking, but after locking swords with him, a muffled voice reverberated from deep within his bucket helmet.

"I did not think that I would end up fighting against another chosen hero like myself."

"I can't say I anticipated this either."

Since he was putting all his strength into his sword, Reiji's voice was somewhat strained. Then for some reason, the strength Elliot put into his sword weakened. Elliot then spoke up, sounding like he was smiling beneath his armor.

"It seems that you are at the level of an amateur swordsman who only started learning, but as expected, you are remarkably strong. You have quite the knack for it."

Reiji was a bit puzzled to hear Elliot speak to him so casually, and questioned him accordingly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. It's just that I haven't spoken much with you. I thought it would be nice to chat a bit."

"I really don't think this is the kind of time for chatting."

"No? If you don't talk when you have the chance, you may just find yourself regretting it. It is my belief that I should take the time to properly speak with those that I have the opportunity to... though it requires patience to talk with a man."

Reiji wasn't sure if that last part was a lie or not.

"Elliot, I heard you are the hero summoned by the Holy State, so why are you doing what her Imperial Highness Graziella tells you to? As a hero, there is no need for you to follow the orders of an imperial princess."

"This is just a one-time thing. I took her on in a match and lost, you see. I have to keep my word."

"Though you say that, I feel like you're not very motivated."

Hearing this, Elliot replied with a dumbfounded yet somewhat amused voice.

"No? That wasn't my intention."

"That's a lie."

Elliot laughed and quit playing dumb.

"You just may be right. In truth, I do not enjoy bullying a little girl. I may just be holding back unconsciously."

He must have been referring to Liliana. While Elliot had eased up on his attacks, Reiji looked to the side. Elliot's attendant mage Christa seemed to be fighting against Mizuki one on one now as well.

"Could it be... that you know the truth behind this case?"

"No, I do not know the truth. But there is no way that a man who holds such passionate rage would take part in acts of evil without a reason. Any man who would wear himself to tatters to protect a woman the way he did couldn't possibly be a bad guy... Not that I intend to praise him as a good guy."

"But nevertheless, you don't have any intention to just lose, do you?"

"Naturally. On the contrary. If I held back that much, it would just make me angry."

As Reiji and Elliot's conversation came to an end, they unlocked

their swords and reclaimed some distance from one another. Elliot's movements had gotten a little dull and the lightning clad around his sword began to weaken. The effect of his body reinforcement magic and weapon enchantment magic seemed to be reaching their time limits. Seeing that, Reiji suddenly yelled out.

"Sensei!"

"Are you hoping for support? I'm afraid her opponent is Imperial Princess Graziella."

When Reiji signaled Felmenia, Elliot suggested that it would be impossible for her to do anything. But elsewhere in the plaza, Felmenia heard his voice loud and clear. She too had started thinking that it was about time. She then started constructing offensive magicka against Graziella, who was still keeping her distance. The magicka circle at her feet invoked another plane. With her hand held out like a blade, she traced an inverted pentagram as she chanted her spell.

"That which I desire stands before the fury of the storm. Oh wind, blow fiercely. Raise a cry of despair. For the sake of exterminating anything and everything before my eyes as much as you please..."

After her chant that left an intoxicating reverberation in the air was complete, the magicka circle flashed a brilliant radiance. With the drawn pentagram at its center, a sudden gust blew in from the surroundings. The perfectly still scene around Felmenia suddenly transformed into a blustering chaos. While resisting being blown away by the extraordinarily powerful wind pressure herself, Felmenia fired out her keyword.

"Clauneck's Wind!"

The compressed air that had gathered around her released as an intense shock wave that assaulted the area. Nearby trees bent backward from the pressure. Fire magic, water magic, the soldiers' various magics, and all the bricks on the ground were blown away. Graziella too was caught in the shock wave, but she endured through it. It seemed she'd taken some damage, but she acted as though she were unfazed by the attack.

"My, my, it seems I made light of you, White Flame-dono. To think you were holding on to this kind of trump card..."

"And as expected, you withstood it..."

"But of course." Graziella gazed at Felmenia with disdain. "White Flame-dono, is it not about time that you run out of steam?"

“That’s what you think. However, it seems Your Imperial Highness is also incapable of capturing me. Even if you spent all eternity firing such low-level spells at me, you would never be able to defeat me, I’m afraid.”

A smile floated up on Graziella’s face as she heard those provocative words, though she did not seem amused at all.

“So you say. But you do understand that if not for the damned Twilight Beheading Princess’s presence, I would have knocked you down long ago, right? Besides, you saw it, didn’t you? That fight in the southern plaza.”

“I’m saying that if you do not put in at least that much effort, then you will never defeat me.”

“Then so be it. If you are willing to go that far, I’ll allow you to thoroughly taste my magic.”

Graziella was no longer able to endure Felmenia’s provocation and began chanting the spell for the teleportation magic she had been refraining from using all this time.

“Heed my desires. Fly in from the beyond. To the one who won’t hold an audience with me, my hail detaches you from the world’s entangled and inseparable laws. Become a power that surpasses all reason. Open, Devil Connection!”

With the release of her keyword, the night sky warped as it was being twisted and became vague. Sensing the teleportation of a massive object incoming, Felmenia began yelling.

“It’s coming! Everyone take evasive maneuvers until you reach the safe zone! After evading, please begin using magic at full power!”

Following her lead, Titania; the knights around her; Mizuki, who was trading fire with Christa; and Reiji who was fighting Elliot, all pulled back from the combat zone. Immediately following that, a massive rock appeared in the sky. It wasn’t quite as large as the one she’d used at the southern plaza, but it was more than enough of a threat. Felmenia began using her magicka at full power in response.

“Just as the eternal wind conveys! Send the shining and swaying flames to His side! Hear my voice! Thou art the Ishim dyed in white! Hear my voice! Thou art the Ishim that shakes off all calamity! White Flame Hyacinth!”

Felmenia’s white flames flew towards the massive rock. Using the reconstructed fire magicka she’d learned from Suimei, she burned the massive rock to ashes.

“That damned magic from the other day? Something that I’ve staved off once before won’t protect you from this!”

After her violent threat, Graziella once more began to chant her teleportation magic and called another massive rock in the sky. Then another and another as she repeated the chant continuously. As for Reiji and the others...

“Reiji, it seems the little princess of the Empire is planning to bring this to a decisive end. It’s over.”

“We don’t know that yet.”

“Hmph. I do not know where you get the confidence to say that. Do you have some kind of plan? Well, so be it. If you do, then it has nothing to do with me. I will simply do what I must over here.”

With that, Elliot began applying physical reinforcement on his body, which was already reinforced by the divine protection of the hero summoning. He then began chanting his spell.

“Here I come, Reiji. I present my wish in celebration before the extolled spirit of wisdom. Oh lightning, demonstrate your sharpness before me. Blade Discharge!”

As soon as his keyword cut through the air, Elliot’s orichalcos blade clad itself in lightning and shot out an electrical discharge from its tip. Or at least, it should have.

“What—?!”

“What the hell?!”

Two bewildered exclamations of surprise came from the same side of the battlefield. It was Elliot and Graziella. Though Elliot had finished the chant for his spell, his magicka did not activate. And for Graziella, who had conjured multiple spells to fire at Felmenia, not a single one was actually invoked. Her eyes darted around in confusion. Their magics had failed with all too perfect timing.

But Elliot suffered more for it. As he was using his magicka while crossing swords with Reiji, Reiji gained the upper hand and moved in on him. However...

“Tch, too naive!”

Elliot let out a cry. The distance between them was still enough for him to make a move in return. Without his magicka, he immediately switched to his sword and thrust out towards Reiji. As he did, Reiji kicked the ground with a great deal of force. The bricks he sent flying collided with Elliot’s sword and skewed the trajectory of his thrust. Reiji then ran to meet him.

“Hah!”

“Gah!”

Reiji drove the hilt of his orichalcum sword right into Elliot’s skull. Taken by the blow, Elliot’s body rolled backward across the ground two or three times.

“Elliot-sama!”

Christa’s scream reached Reiji’s ears. But he paid her no mind and went straight towards Graziella. Thanks to Felmenia’s scheme, she was still unable to use magic. She readied her fists in a fluster, but was too slow to counter the brandished sword coming right at her.

“My apologies in advance for this!”

As he apologized, Reiji drove the hilt of his sword with all his might past Graziella’s fists and into her abdomen. She fell backward onto her rear end in defeat, and Reiji thrust his sword at her neck to make his position clear.

“The match is ours.”

“Ridiculous... This kind of...”

Graziella’s surprise was more directed at the fact that she was unable to use magic rather than Reiji’s declaration of victory. Her face was still gripped in bewilderment. To demand an answer, she then turned to Felmenia.

“What... Why can I no longer use magic?! Just what kind of magic did you bastards use?!”

“It is not like I used a spell to magically silence you,” Felmenia replied. “The reason you can no longer use magic is simply because you’ve used too much of it, Your Highness.”

“Used too much, you say...? Ridiculous! I’m nowhere near running out of mana yet.”

“So it seems. However, the magic you’re using is based on the same magic behind the hero summoning technique. It is not magic that uses the Elements. Therefore, the Elements are not supporting your magic. So due to the massive increase of the mystical entropy in this place, the phenomenon known as magicka melt occurred.”

“M-Mystical what? Magic-a melt... What is this nonsense?”

“Mystical entropy is produced when the components that establish mystical laws and the components that establish physical laws end up in a cluttered state. If this happens in the extreme, the throughput of spells becomes insufficient and the phenomenon of magicka melt occurs, preventing magic from activating.”

“But—”

“But this has never happened before, right? That is because, on top of the magic used to teleport massive rocks, you’ve never used magic that heavily increased entropy in such a way before.”

As Felmenia began explaining things to Graziella, she recalled everything Suimei had taught her about this phenomenon.

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“What about the magicka melt phenomenon that occurs when mystical entropy reaches its limit?”

Felmenia inclined her head to the side as she asked this. Suimei then once more began his explanation from the beginning.

“Yes, when entropy in one location increases, we just discussed how—physically—things will become unstable and easier to manipulate. But if entropy increases within a single space and within a certain amount of time, it will prevent magicka from being used any further.”

“Such a thing happens?”

“It does. The magic of this world has the portion of magic which is invoked from another plane taken care of by the Elements. Thanks to that, the outbreak of the components that establish mystical law is suppressed, and entropy doesn’t increase much when you use magic. Thanks to this, it never happens here, so I’m not surprised you don’t know about it.” After the brief tangent, Suimei returned to his explanation. “When entropy increases radically within a single space, the fight between the tiny people becomes fierce. Not just the components that establish physical laws, but also because of the increase of the components that establish mystical laws, they also receive quite the burden.”

“But did you not say that when you use magicka to instigate a mystical action, those components end up increasing, so entropy ends up increasing and magicka becomes easier to use? Is that wrong?”

“Before the components can scatter in the area, if one gives birth to too many of them in an instant, they will end up crowding together right there. Even components of the same type will begin to interfere with each other. In other words, the tiny people will find it difficult to move around and magicka will end up being unusable.”

To add on to his explanation, Suimei began drawing on a piece of paper.

“Think of magicka as something that’s activated due to the power of the tiny invisible people. It will be a slightly microscopic way of thinking about it, but the tiny people require time to perform their work to activate magicka before it can be invoked. When the entropy increases in one location, the tiny people will find it harder and harder to move around, which affects the time to perform their work. Eventually, it will end up affecting the use of magicka itself.”

“In short, you are talking about creating a time delay before one can activate magicka?”

“That’s right.”

“But why does that lead to being unable to use magicka? If it is only a time delay, then once the magicka is constructed, should it not activate after enough time has passed?”

“If you’re doubtful, try remembering the foundation of magicka activation.”

Suimei urged her to ruminate on it. Based on what she had said before, Felmenia began talking as she thought it through.

“The foundation...? For starters, I think that what we are talking about is based on the premise that when magicka comes into existences, it should not particularly mean that it will no longer be able to—Ah!”

“Do you get it?”

“It is the time, right?”

“Yes, exactly. Magicka is something that is invoked only when the predetermined mystical actions are combined, the predetermined processes are followed, and the predetermined time has not yet elapsed. Normally, because magicka is invoked right as the actions are complete, one does not generally take notice of it. But in truth, the time until invocation is something to consider. If a large amount of time passes from construction to invocation, naturally this would violate the predetermined time allowed, and the constructed spell will begin to dissolve.”

After explaining that much, Suimei’s face and tone turned very serious.

“To sum it up, that is the phenomenon known as magicka melt.”

If the conditions for activation are not met, then naturally the

constructed magicka will become useless. Of course, it would not affect magickas whose effects were already active, but magickas that had not been activated would be severely restricted. If one were to predict the oppressive condition of entropy, it was possible to hold magicka's activation on standby and adjust the predetermined time to easily solve the problem, but there were many people who never considered things to that extent.

"Just as I said before, modern magicka theory produces an especially large quantity of entropy within a single space. In accordance with the grand unified theory, the magicka used mixes together many magicka systems and can be used both faster than normal and with great effect. Thus the production of components is accelerated."

"In other words, magicka with greater effects would be restricted in proportion to the scale of those effects, right?"

"That's right. And so the important thing here is that the magic that dangerous woman uses will greatly increase the entropy because of its power."

"If I am not mistaken... It was what was called teleportation magicka in Suimei-dono's world, right?"

"That's right. You got a good look at it, didn't you?"

"Yes. It did not have many processes and activated quite quickly. It does not make use of modern magicka theory, but... even so, is it the same?"

"Yes. It didn't take much time to activate, but practically speaking, that's only because the magicka circle was prepared beforehand in the lining of her coat. It does not change the fact that teleportation magicka is something difficult to physically manifest. That's why..."

"These 'components that establish mystical laws' you spoke of will suddenly be produced, and entropy will greatly increase, right?"

As Felmenia arrived at the right answer, Suimei revealed a mischievous smile.

"That's right. With that, you now grasp the goal of this lesson, right?"

What Felmenia had been using up until now was the magicka she learned from Suimei based on modern magicka theory. Because she was still a beginner, there wasn't much to expect from its destructive power, but when it came to increasing mystical entropy,

it was a rather simple matter to bring about the phenomenon known as magicka melt.

After all, Graziella wasn't the only one increasing entropy in the area. Though the amount produced was quite small, Reiji, Mizuki, the knights, and even Christa and Graziella's mages were all contributing. And then there was Elliot, who used magicka from another world. Since his magicka did not rely on the Elements taking over a portion of the spell, it increased entropy considerably as well. Altogether, the potential for the magicka melt was quite high, which was why Suimei had chosen this plan. In fact, Elliot was an important part of the plan.

"I'm sure you saw it before, but do you remember how Elliot linked together his sword skills and magic? If he suddenly were no longer able to use one of them, it would leave him wide open. That's what we'll aim for," Suimei had explained.

And precisely as Suimei had predicted, Elliot invoked his multiple enchantments over and over again to keep them active. If Reiji called out when he was about to renew them, they could catch him with his guard down.

"I see. Your ridiculous magic and the fact that magic could no longer be used, was all that guy's..." Graziella said in an annoyed tone.

"With all due respect, I have no need to answer your questions," replied Felmenia, resolutely cutting her off.

Since Reiji and the others were also present, carelessly answering too many questions would only cause trouble for Suimei. With his sword still pointed at her, Reiji then requested she fulfill her obligation as the loser.

"With this, it's decided. Please remove your soldiers and withdraw."

However, Graziella snorted in displeasure.

"I refuse."

"What?"

"Do you really think that you've won with this? You've only thrust your damned sword in my face. Or are you saying that you think you could pierce my heart right now?"

As Graziella pointed this out, Reiji spoke in an indifferent tone to hide the panic rising up within him.

"If you insist on fighting more, then..."

"Cease this. There's no way that you could kill the imperial

princess of a nation with your own hands."

Reiji was certainly bluffing. After seeing through this, Graziella looked disappointed. Since Reiji was not used to threatening others, he was unable to convince her of her defeat definitively. Their conversation, however, was shortly interrupted by the sound of a mass of quickly approaching footsteps. It wasn't enough to shake the ground, but it was obvious that there was quite a number of them.

"It seems like reinforcements have arrived," Graziella said with a provoking smile.

"It couldn't be... You prepared contingency troops?!" Titania cried.

"Of course. Facing such a strong opponent, it's only natural to prepare a contingency or two. It seems you were just naive."

Despite the sweat forming on her brow, Graziella let out a fearless laugh. Reiji then repeated himself once more before her.

"But I *do* still have my blade to your throat."

"As long as I give the order, the soldiers of the Empire will not hesitate. Besides, it doesn't seem that White Flame-dono has any more schemes up her sleeve."

"Ugh..."

Felmenia gritted her teeth at her oversight. Graziella sneered at her as she commanded all of her subordinates.

"Everyone, do not hold back! Restrain all these fools!"

Her troops replied vigorously, and the soldiers they were just fighting began to move. Mizuki and the knights were cornered and driven over to where Felmenia was. And just as they were all surrounded...

"Graziella Filas Rieseld, you're the same as ever. Have you already forgotten how I rebuked you before for that nasty habit of only fighting those in a weaker position than you?"

A cool voice swept through the streets on a red wind. Immediately following it, the front line of Graziella's reinforcements was blown away like they were caught in an explosion.

"Wha?!"

"Just what in the..."

Both Reiji and Graziella were at a loss for words. The reinforcements that were coming in from the side alley were sent flying by a wind with a red brilliance, soldier and mage alike. It took out the front row of them, leaving the back rows staggering.

Those who'd been hit by the red wind lay unmoving. Scattered in every direction, they were all unconscious. As if lurking over them, the red wind that had knocked them out was now hanging at the alley's entrance.

A puff of dust in the air scattered as the red wind dissipated. Standing there in its place was Lefille Grakis, having regained her original form. With her signature sword bigger than her own body resting on her shoulder, she gazed sharply at the soldiers before her. Before the overpowering pressure from this young girl who was not yet even twenty years old, the soldiers that were still standing were completely frozen in place. On the other hand, when Graziella saw Lefille, her eyes shot wide open in surprise.

"It can't be... The Shrine Maiden of Noshias?! You're alive...?"

As Lefille turned towards that voice, her eyes stopped on Reiji and the others.

"It seems that I made it in time," she said in a sigh of relief.

The soldiers who'd been freed from Lefille's oppressive gaze as she looked away regained control of their bodies and began to move again as they came to their senses. Perhaps due to the caliber of their training, they wasted no time taking up their formation again. The soldiers in front readied their swords while the mages fell to the back and prepared to fire magic aimed at Lefille all at once.

"Look out!"

Seeing this, Reiji worriedly called out to Lefille. But she simply turned back to the soldiers in a composed fashion. Not moments later, the multitude of spells fired at Lefille came rushing in. But as though she'd been struck by nothing but a gentle breeze, she stood there perfectly calm.

"Ridiculous... Magic did nothing...?"

One of the soldiers trembled in fear as they groaned, giving voice to the inner feelings of all the present soldiers. Even Graziella was gripped with surprise.

"The Shrine Maiden's spirit power... To think it could even render magic useless..."

The mages turned towards Graziella as they heard her muttering. As if thrusting that ruthless truth before them, Lefille roared out at them.

"Did you think that magic blessed by the Goddess would work against me, who has accepted a spirit within my body?!"

Lefille's thunderous voice drowned out all sound in the bustling battlefield. It was like electricity in the air as it shocked everyone around her. Lefille then raised her sword overhead once more. As if hailed by that action, the red wind formed a maelstrom with her sword at its center. And as she swung it down, not only a whole half of the soldiers deployed before her, but even the walls of the buildings and the pavement on the street were blown away by the explosive might of the wind she wielded.

All that from a single intense swing. All present were at a loss for words and doubted their own eyes. The girl accompanied by the red wind was just that overwhelming.

The wind once more began blowing in out of nowhere. As if it had no other choice but to gather in this place, it swarmed in from all directions of the city and gathered around Lefille as she clad herself in a red brilliance. As bewilderment spread through the area, one of the soldiers raised a voice of realization.

"The power of spirits? You can't mean... this is Ishaktney's..."

That triggered a cascade effect in the other troops.

"Th-The red wind that comes up in Saint Alshalia's legend, the Red Gale... They say everything swallowed by that red tempest is returned to nothingness without exception..."

"Th-That's impossible!"

"But that girl just said she was a spirit or something..."

"H-Hey, I heard Princess Graziella say something about her being a shrine maiden too!"

As Lefille thrust the tip of her sword into the ground, the panicking soldiers all cowered in fear at the sound alone. A few of them fell to their butts. Looking down at them, Lefille once more began speaking.

"If you do not wish to become rust upon my sword at the hands of spirits, make way!"

As Lefille's thunderous voice rang through the air once more, the soldiers opened a path for her like they had no choice in the matter. It was as though they were scrambling for their lives. A few of them even fell to their knees and began praying to the Goddess. Those who didn't get out of the way in time were sent flying ruthlessly by another sudden gust created by Lefille. She cast a cold stare at the remaining men. When she turned to the left, all the soldiers on that side cringed in fear. When she turned to the right, all the soldiers on that side began to tremble.

“Oh Goddess... Oh Goddess...”

“S-Spare us! Please, please have mercy...”

“We were ordered to... We had no choice...”

The soldiers were already defeated. The only ones still conscious were praying or begging Lefille for mercy. Witnessing the state her troops had fallen into, Graziella spoke up.

“Ridiculous... To think even the Shrine Maiden of Noshias was his ally... Did I misread him?”

“Of course. There’s no way that Suimei-kun would make that kind of mistake in his plan.”

Graziella ground her teeth at this completely unexpected outcome. Before her, Lefille proudly boasted like she was talking about her own family. Her behavior towards Graziella was quite disrespectful, but she was in a position that permitted it.

“It has been a long time, Princess Graziella. It has been two years since we last saw each other, but it seems you haven’t changed at all.”

“To just shamelessly greet me like nothing happened after all that... Surely you did not come to renew the old friendship between Noshias and Nelferia.”

“If you understand that, then there’s no reason to put on airs. The reason I am here today... is to strike you down with my own hand.”

“What...?!”

“Oh Red Gale of mine...”

With her spiritual request, Lefille’s right arm was clad in a red wind. And then, with a voice filled with anger...

“This is for putting Suimei-kun through so much trouble when he was already injured. Resign yourself and accept it!”

Lefille’s fist flew forward like a heavenly wind and struck Graziella right in the abdomen.

“Gwah!”

Graziella was sent flying splendidly like a thrown rubber ball. Even after she hit the ground and tried to get up, she was shaky and unable to move like she wanted to. Tossing only a single glance her way, Lefille then turned to Reiji and the others. After looking at each one of their faces, she revealed a slight smile.

“It seems you’re all safe.”

Lefille was one of their acquaintances, but naturally Reiji and the others had no idea who she was. On behalf of everyone’s

bewilderment, Reiji replied to her.

"I'm sorry. You speak like we've met somewhere before, but you are...?"

"...How upsetting. Have we not been living together the past few days?"

Based on those words, her appearance, and her tone, Reiji finally figured it out. With an astonished expression plastered on his face, he articulated his guess.

"C-Could you be Lefille-chan?!"

"I'm a little self-conscious of having '-chan' applied to my name when I look like this, Reiji-kun."

Following up for Reiji, Mizuki raised a surprised voice.

"B-B-But Lefille-chan was an adorable little girl!"

"Up until recently, yes. But no more. I only looked like that as the result of some complicated circumstances; this is my original form."

"Complicated circumstances? Just what on earth could happen to make a person tiny...?"

"I could explain, but it would take a while. To say it like Suimei-kun, it's because it's fantasy."

Hearing that, Titania also let out an astonished sigh.

"Suimei is one thing, but surprising things just keep happening one after the other..."

Of course, Felmenia was also surprised about Lefille.

"A-Are you really Lefille...?"

"Didn't I tell you about this before, Lady Felmenia? About how that small figure was not my true form? Suimei-kun said so as well, right?"

"Th-Th-There is no way I would believe that sort of thing! People do not just suddenly become smaller! I thought you and Suimei-dono were just having a joke of it together!"

"So you thought Suimei-kun and I were lying? How cruel," said Lefille, her shoulders drooping.

"But... why are you suddenly back in your original form, then?" Reiji asked.

"A few days ago, I prepared a magic circle to make it happen. It was completed, and I only just fully returned a moment ago."

"I see..."

As they talked, Graziella finally got a hold of herself again.

"What are all of you doing?! Can you bastards even call

yourselves soldiers of the Empire like this?! Take up your swords!”

Her hostility still burning strong, she barked commands at the soldiers who were still trembling in fear. As she did, Titania turned towards her with a composed expression.

“You do not know when to give up, Your Imperial Highness. Is it not unbecoming of you to get lost in anger and fight on past the point of reason?”

“Silence. Even if the Shrine Maiden and a hero are here, if I use the power of the Empire...”

Graziella cast aside her dignity and refused to accept defeat. Hearing this, Lefille looked up at the heavens and spoke to Graziella while stifling her laughter.

“Hmph. Can you still say such a thing after seeing that?”

“What do you mean by that...?”

Hearing what she said, everyone present looked upward. In the night sky of the Empire, an enormous magicka circle drawn with the ultramarine light of mana drowned out the light from the stars. Trembling, Mizuki cried out when she saw it.

“Th-Th-Th-Th-That! What is that?! There’s a giant magic circle floating in the sky!”

“It’s huge... Why is such a large magic circle... Not only that, but in the sky...?”

Reiji’s eyes were wide open in shock as he spoke in partial sentences, completely dumbfounded. But Graziella said nothing. In the midst of all this, Christa moved over to Elliot and attempted to wake him up.

“Ugh... It seems that while I was unconscious, something outrageous has happened,” he muttered once he came back to his senses.

“Elliot-dono is here too, huh?” said Lefille.

“My goodness, it seems an extremely familiar little girl has grown up quite a bit.”

“Save the talk for later. It’s coming.”

Just as she finished her sentence, a wave of mana surged forth from the center of the magic circle. Like fireflies dancing in the air, golden particles began rising from the ground and were sucked up by the magic circle floating in the starry sky.

It was a fantastical sight, but it wasn’t over yet. Many small magic circles began to appear within the larger one. But they were only small in comparison; there was no telling how large they really

were from this distance. And after a few moments, there was a pulse in the air. The imperial capital was then engulfed in light falling from the heavens. Felmenia was the only one who knew just what this spectacle was. It was the same magicka Suimei used during their battle back at Royal Castle Camellia—Starfall.

Eventually, the light receded. It appeared no one had been harmed. Reiji turned to Lefille, who had acted like she was expecting this strange turn of events.

"Lefille... Lefille-san, what was that?"

"That? That was something Lady Felmenia prepared."

"What?! Is that true, Sensei?!"

"Huh? Oh... well, yes. It was a spell prepared in advance... um... It'snotwhatitlookslike."

Felmenia managed to keep up the act as Reiji questioned her. Then in a somewhat forced manner, she cleared her throat and turned to Graziella.

"Your Imperial Highness, you just witnessed the power of that magic, did you not? After seeing such incredible power for yourself, do you intend to keep on fighting? Your Highness's soldiers are all but devastated now."

Felmenia indicated the assortment of men on the ground. They had no will left to fight, especially not against Lefille. They must have thought the light from the falling stars was the wrath of the Goddess. They were currently all on their knees in prayer. But they didn't know any better. There was no way they'd ever imagine that kind of power could be drawn out by any single person.

"Shit... Even so..."

Graziella still did not give up. Cursing, it appeared she still intended to resist. However, the decisive blow that finally made her relent came from a completely unexpected source. From beyond the prostrate soldiers, several more men arrived on horseback. They came to a stop as they approached, forming ranks in an orderly fashion. From among them emerged...

"Lyla, that is enough."

"E-Elder brother..."

Graziella was dumbstruck. The man who rode out from the group on a horse of his own was the Nelferian Empire's first prince, Reanat Filas Rieseld. He had the same long, blond hair Graziella did, wore glasses, and was dressed luxuriously. But before saying anything else to his sister, he first turned towards Reiji and the

others.

"I apologize for addressing you from horseback. Elliot-dono, Shrine Maiden of Noshias, Princess Titania... And you must be the hero summoned by Astel, Reiji-dono, right?"

"Yes."

Reiji gave a brief reply. He did not know just who Reanat was, and was staying on his guard. Titania leaned to whisper in Reiji's ear and fill him in. Meanwhile, Graziella shouted at Reanat.

"Elder brother! What do you mean, 'that's enough?!'"

"Exactly as it sounds. Restrain yourself."

"But...!"

"Lyla, you have caused too much of a scene. Besides, it would become quite serious if word of a hero fighting another hero reached the ears of the Holy State, would it not?"

"That's... certainly true, but."

It seemed that even Graziella was unable to put up much resistance against the crown prince of the Empire. She clenched her fists, visibly vexed.

"It has been a long time, Your Imperial Highness Reanat."

"Yes, it has been a while, Princess Titania. As ever, you are quite awe-inspiring. You are a flower who blooms on the battlefield indeed."

"Saying 'on the battlefield' does not count as flattery, Your Imperial Highness. Setting that aside, what you had said before..."

"Yes, we shall be withdrawing. However, about the criminal..."

But before Reanat could finish what he was saying...

"Oh my, it seems something amazing is happening here."

Suimei appeared from an alley that led to the street with Liliana at his side and dragging the ruined body that was once Romeon. Seeing them, Reiji and Mizuki let out cries of joy.

"Suimei!"

"Suimei-kun! Liliana-chan!"

"Hmm... It seems things have concluded on your end, right?"

When Titania asked for confirmation, Suimei replied like he'd just been through something incredibly difficult.

"Yeah, somehow or other."

After parting ways with Rogue, Suimei had collected Liliana and immediately brought her back here. Reiji and the others rushed over to them. Seeing that Liliana was downcast, Mizuki crouched down and talked to her.

“Liliana-chan?”

“...Yes...”

“Mizuki, sorry, but keep Liliana company for a bit.”

Leaving Liliana to Mizuki and the others, Suimei began walking towards Reanat and Graziella.

“You’re sure dressed nicely. Are you related to that dangerous woman?”

Suimei rubbed his chin as he addressed the prince arrogantly. The soldiers in his company began to stir. They intended to rush out and put an immediate end to such rudeness, but Reanat raised a hand to stop them.

“I am Reanat Filas Rieseld. You are?”

“Suimei Yakagi. I was summoned as a bonus to that hero over there.”

“Ah, a guest from another world, I see.”

Upon hearing he was summoned together with a hero, he couldn’t put up a strong front. Seeing this, Suimei handed over Romeon, who he’d dragged all this way.

“Here. This guy is the true culprit behind the incidents. Take him... Although, fair warning, he’s not in a state where he can hear what you’re saying anymore.”

His body completely blackened, Romeon was not even recognizable as an elf anymore. Seeing this, Reanat knitted his brow dubiously.

“You say this is the criminal?”

“Yeah. He tried to use dark magic, but instead got engulfed in it and met his fate. The recent incidents were all devised by him.”

“And... you expect me to believe all this?”

“Well, it’s not like there’s anyone who can give you testimony. But if you *do* believe me, things would be settled quite peacefully, right? If you guys accept that this man was the criminal, then at the very least, things won’t get any more serious than they have, right?”

Reanat began contemplating Suimei’s words. He was surely thinking about what option before him was best to take.

“Also, I’ll have you leave Liliana in my care.”

“Bastard, do you really think we’d let you get away with that?”

Graziella angrily objected, but Reanat simply nodded his head.

“So be it. If you hand the real culprit over to us, we will let you do as you wish.”

“Elder brother?!”

“Lyla, we stand before the Shrine Maiden and two heroes. There’s also the matter of that magic light that engulfed the city.”

“So that’s how it is.”

Suimei wasn’t sure if Reiji and the others had heard all this, but having heard what he wanted to, Suimei brought the conversation to an end.

“Bastard...”

Having things turn against her in a most unpleasing way, Graziella glared daggers at Suimei. Seeing this, Suimei shrugged his shoulders.

“Hmm? From the look of things, you weren’t able to give birth to a devil.”

“...What was that?”

“It’s nothing. If you were able to verify the existence of devils in this world, you could decrease the entropy in the area; that’s all. You wouldn’t have lost your ability to use magic.”

Though she didn’t understand Suimei’s fragmented explanation, after hearing what he said, she seemed to realize just who had planned all of this out.

“I will be most sure pay you back for this...”

“Yeah, yeah. Sure you will. Next time, I’ll properly beat you to a pulp, so make sure you come at me prepared.”

With those as his parting words, Suimei walked away. Felmenia then ran up to him to meet him ahead of the others. In a quiet voice, she happily reported her victory.

“Suimei-dono! I did it! I was able to do it just as you explained it!”

“I knew you could. I’m glad it went well.”

“Heehee...”

Felmenia revealed a dopey smile as Suimei patted her on the shoulder. His acknowledgment was all it took to make her that happy. Suimei then glanced over at Reiji and the others, who were taking care of Liliana and making a fuss over Lefille. Now that she’d returned to her original form, they were probably bombarding her with questions. Even Liliana had completely lost her cool upon seeing her and was shouting, demanding an explanation and calling her a fraud.

Lefille, meanwhile, was just going along with all of it. Now that he could at last see eye to eye with her again, Suimei smiled

pleasantly.

"It seems you've safely returned to your original form."

"Yeah, thanks to you."

Lefille showed her gratitude and suddenly embraced Suimei.

"Suimei-kun, thank you."

"H-Huh? Huuuh?!"

"It's all thanks to you that I was able to return to my original body. Not to mention what happened back in Astel... I can't thank you enough."

Suimei was quite shaken by all this, but Lefille only continued to thank him. It was certainly as she said, but Suimei's mind was in chaos after being embraced like that. And he wasn't the only one who was quite flustered at this turn of events. Though her reaction was slightly delayed, Felmenia cried out.

"Wh-What are you doing, Lefille?!"

"Oh, no, I... I was just gripped by emotion, and, um..."

Lefille began to fidget nervously as she turned red. She was boiling over with so much embarrassment that one had to wonder where her normal gallant self had gone. After a while, Elliot and Christa approached Suimei and the others.

"To think that you were also summoned..."

"Oops, you heard what we were talking about? Well, like I said, I was just a bonus. A freebie."

"Is that really so? Also, did you not say before that I shouldn't take Lefille-chan with me because she was small and unable to defend herself? How do you care to explain all this, then?"

Hearing Elliot's words mixed with anger, Suimei played dumb in reply.

"Oh, you know... She definitely couldn't then, riiight?"

"Ugh..."

"I didn't lie about that part."

Suimei wore a devious smile, and Elliot put on an annoyed expression as he bluntly spoke back.

"I really do hate you after all."

"I don't care if you hate me. But..."

"Yes, I understand. I will resign myself graciously from the case... It seems this whole affair has only brought about one defeat after another for me."

"Hmm? What, didn't you lose on purpose?"

"Somehow, you saying that only makes me feel more defeated."

“Is that so? Either way, you have my thanks this time.”

As Suimei properly thanked Elliot for backing down, Elliot pouted like he was dissatisfied. Perhaps because he was feeling self-conscious, he’d turned a bit red in the cheeks. When he was done talking to Suimei, Lefille addressed him.

“Elliot-dono, you may not be satisfied with how things turned out, but you should know that I also met Suimei-kun thanks to an oracle from the Goddess.”

“Is that right? My goodness, just what is going on?”

As one would expect, Elliot didn’t continue to complain about the Goddess. Instead, he fell silent and shook his head.

“Elliot-sama.”

“Ah, yes. Well then, shall we also return?”

Urged on by Christa, Elliot walked off with her as the two of them headed back to their lodgings at the Church of Salvation. It seemed that Graziella, Reanat, and their soldiers were also in the middle of departing. Suimei then turned to Reiji, who was walking over to him with Mizuki and the others in tow.

“I really owe you one this time.”

“It’s fine. Don’t sweat it.”

Suimei and Reiji traded a fist bump. And with that, the coma incidents that had been plaguing the imperial capital and the evening’s battle came to a simultaneous end.

★

Late at night in a church in the imperial capital, a skinny elven man was waiting for someone with unmanageable boredom. He’d come to deliver a regular report. He would hand over the information he’d gathered to his point of contact. That’s all there was to it.

But no matter how long he waited, his contact didn’t show up. The skinny elf was quite high-strung, so he made a point to always show up early for their meetings. So factoring that in to how long had passed since their appointed meeting time, he’d been waiting around for quite a while. Naturally, due to his nervousness, he got irritated quite easily. The tapping of his foot crescendoed to the point he was about ready to kick a nearby bench, when...

“Is somebody there?”

Suddenly hearing someone’s voice, the elf stopped his foot mid-

swing. The soft voice echoed from deep within the chapel where a statue modeled after the Goddess stood. When he turned around to look, he saw a therianthrope nun standing there under the skylight, illuminated by the moon shining through it. She walked out from its pure light towards the man, holding on to herself like she was protecting her stole. The elf hadn't expected any clergy to still be around at this hour, and stiffened up as she approached. The therianthrope nun called out to him in a sweet voice like that of a cat.

"To come to the church so late... Do you have some business here?"

"No... I was just using it a little as a place to meet up with someone..."

"Oh my, is that so?"

As he spoke without really making any sort of excuse, the sister gave him a gentle smile. Seeing as how he'd come to the church with no real business there, he was expecting her to be irritated with him. But it seemed that was not the case. However, this was the first he'd ever heard of someone having a shift at this hour at the Church of Salvation.

"Um, sister, why are you at the church so late yourself?"

"To tell the truth, just like you, I am waiting for somebody here."

Her words should have been kind and gentle. She still spoke with the melodious, purring voice of a feline therianthrope, but he felt a shadow abruptly come over her cheerful smile. Seeing that slight change, without knowing why, the elf could feel goosebumps on his skin.

"...What a coincidence, huh?"

"Yes, it truly is."

The sister's charming laugh resounded through the sanctuary. Hearing it, the elf was led to believe that the dark feeling he'd just had was nothing more than a passing fancy. Then, as if talking to a partner in crime, he spoke to her with a vulgar smile on his face.

"Hey, sister..."

"Yes?"

"By the way, do you mind telling about who you're waiting for? You've got me curious, wondering who a nun would have to meet so late in the night."

"That's... somewhat hard for me to admit."

“Could it be your lover?”

The elf man stepped forward with confidence as he closed in on the nun. He didn’t usually entertain this kind of conversation, but his boredom had gotten the better of him. It didn’t matter what it was, he just wanted to amuse himself and kill some time. And he was sure the only reason a nun would be meeting someone in secret so late in the night would be for a tryst.

“That is... Though it is embarrassing...”

Just as he guessed, the sister’s cheeks began to redden.

“I have been waiting here for you.”

“Wha—?”

The skinny elf let out a bewildered gasp as the nun’s right hand pierced through his chest. When she pulled it out of him, all the strength left his body. His heart fell to the floor. His body had become like a rusted puppet; it no longer moved as he willed it and a thick red fluid poured out of it. Then, like his strings had been cut, he collapsed into a heap.

All that he could see as he felt himself being pulled into the abyss was the figure of the nun with her stole hanging over one hand and her other arm completely dyed red. His consciousness faded as he watched her lick the blood from her fingers.

“Hmph. Elves always extol just how high class their blood is, but its taste is unexpectedly bad.”

The disappointed voice of the therianthrope nun, Clarissa, reverberated through the interior of the church. Looking at the empty husk of the elf with disdain as she rued the taste of his disgusting blood, she turned away as if she had completely lost interest. As she did, a small shadowy figure appeared behind her.

“...As usual, you’ve got quite the nasty way of killing people.”

“Oh my, Jill. You were there?”

“I know you noticed me... Good grief, you really are shameless. But yeah, I got here just a moment ago.”

The new arrival was Jillbert Griga, a female dwarf. She had a body that was about the size of a child from the church’s school, but she was over twenty years of age. And within that small body lay an unimaginable and terrifying amount of physical strength. As if to prove it, she was twirling around a large poleaxe on the tip of her finger like it was a quill pen. The poleaxe was three times her size, and certainly didn’t look like something she should be carrying, but she held it like it weighed nothing at all. Before long,

Jillbert leaned on her poleaxe and took a seat. Clarissa then raised a question to her.

"What is the matter?"

"It was terrible... There's no way it couldn't have been. After being sent to the east to fetch drinks, and then on top of that having to take care of that kinda job... Sheesh, that person really does treat their subordinates roughly."

Jillbert struck her shoulder as she let out a tired sigh. She was idly complaining to somebody who was not present. However, keeping her thoughts on the matter brief, she then looked over at the corpse on the floor.

"At any rate, is this alright? That guy was supposed to be Romeon's servant."

"Not long ago, an order was passed down to eliminate both him and Romeon."

"Hmm... That so?"

A ferocious light dwelt in Jillbert's eyes. She was like a beast who had found its prey.

"Yes. He had gone too far and he was too rebellious... That is why..."

"Hmm? I understand the rebellious part, but what do you mean about him going too far?"

"Jill, you are aware that that person had intended to usher in darkness, correct?"

"Yeah. If it was that girl, then she would become quite the asset, right? It was for that reason that they first came into contact with Romeon, right?"

"Yes. According to the plan, we would grant her wish and then usher her in. But Romeon took matters into his own hands and began to use darkness for his own purposes."

Hearing this, Jillbert let out a grand sigh.

"Hahh, I see... So that's how it all panned out. That's why I was against it from the beginning, you know? I said not to pull in Romeon 'cause he had a vulgar stench to him."

"Certainly, your nose is quite exceptional."

"So are we going now? To bump that guy off?"

"No, it seems there won't be a need for that."

While Clarissa and Jillbert were discussing how to mete out punishment, a man's voice cut in on their conversation. Hearing the familiar voice, they both turned to look. Standing there was a man

with silver horns above his ears, a dragonnewt wearing traditional Japanese-esque clothing.

"Hey, you're late. I've never heard of a dragonnewt being so easygoing, you know?"

"It's been so long since I've walked the imperial capital streets. I got a little overwhelmed."

The dragonnewt replied frivolously to Jillbert's criticism. On the other hand, Clarissa greeted him in a cheerful voice like she was seeing a good friend.

"It has been too long, Eanru. But what did you mean about there being no need?"

"Just a moment ago, Romeon's overflowing presence weakened. Also, there was an omen of something big coming."

"...Where from?"

"From the direction of the Imperial University Library— It's here."

Not a moment later, they all felt the presence of a massive amount of mana as the world began to rumble. Pillars of light then began pouring down incessantly from the sky. This abnormal event continued for a while, but eventually, all fell quiet again.

"So he kicked the bucket? No, he's just at death's door... He was completely blown away and never stood a chance."

"...Hey, dragonkin, just who could do that kinda thing?"

"How should I know? I myself would love to know just who holds so much power... Hmph... To think that in one night, not just one but two people other than the heroes would surpass the power of the Geo Malifex."

"Oh? Two people? What do you mean?"

"It's just as I said. Right now, there are a total of five different strong presences within the imperial capital. One was the source of what we just saw. Another is around the north gate... It's probably around where Geo Malifex and the heroes are."

"Huh..."

After Jillbert's halfhearted reply, the interior of the church was filled with Eanru's pleasant laughter.

"You seem to be having fun."

"Yeah, it's been a long time since someone appeared who made my blood boil. It gets me excited."

"Damn battle maniac..."

Jillbert spat out an insult at Eanru, though he was only capable

of hearing such words as a compliment. Thrilled, he began speaking again in a cheerful voice.

"Now... Clarissa, where is the Crimson Pain? Was that man not supposed to come today?"

"The Crimson Pain is still rather busy, so he excused himself from today's gathering."

"Even though that person is coming? He adores that person just like the two of you, so for him to not be coming, the sky must be falling—although, I suppose it is right now! Hahahahaha!"

Eanru suddenly laughing on his own was just business as usual. Clarissa did not pay it any mind. Jillbert then returned to the subject of Crimson Pain's situation.

"There's still a few complications left within the area. Those demons are closing in real flashily, after all. 'Cause of that, he was detained for a while."

"Demons, huh? But didn't the hero subjugate them?"

"Seems that wasn't true."

"Oho..."

"Well, setting that aside... It's the cleanup that's taking time. That country is precious to the Crimson Pain, after all."

"I see. How troublesome such obligations are. Well... It just proves he's strong, despite being a human."

"That's really all you're on about today..."

As Eanru began laughing again, Jillbert could only sigh. Rather than being astonished, it was more that she was just getting tired. But in a complete change of attitude, Jillbert aimed a sharp gaze at Clarissa.

"So, Clara, what will we do about Romeon's successor? If we don't fill in the hole he made, it will become a hindrance to our progress."

"That has already been taken care of."

"Who is it?"

"I had someone in mind that I suggested, but on top of apologizing for this case, it seems that they have invited someone they had their eyes on more seriously than before."

"Their eyes on...? Is it someone who uses darkness?"

"No, darkness is being put on hold. They will come in contact with us another day."

Eanru then joined in on the conversation again.

"So? Is it someone who holds enough power to match us in a

fight?”

“It seems their capabilities will not be a problem. After their business is concluded, it seems they will meet up with us on their own.”

“What are our plans from here?”

“Apparently we are to head towards the Saadias Alliance.”

“Really now? If they were just going to send us back, there was no need to call us here in the first place…”

As Eanru shared his astonishment at the wasted effort, Jillbert stared at him like he was out of line.

“Didn’t you just say you were all excited?”

“Indeed I did. You’ve got me there.”

Eanru once more burst into laughter as Jillbert shook her head. Turning away from him like she had completely given up on him, she looked at Clarissa.

“Why are we going back to the Alliance?”

“It seems that the demons who slipped into Astel have altered the schedule.”

“The schedule, huh…”

Jillbert couldn’t piece everything together from just that. She was trying to put her finger on the broader implication. Clarissa, who was told this directly, Eanru, and even the Crimson Pain, who wasn’t currently present, surely also did not know. Everything was within that person’s head. So, having nothing more to talk about with the others, Jillbert took her weapon and began to walk back home. Eanru was all of a sudden at the exit of the church. The corpse that was on the floor at their feet had also suddenly vanished.

“Well then, everyone, once you have completed your preparations, head to the Alliance.”

As Clarissa’s parting words finished echoing through the air, the church was once more completely silent.

Epilogue I: As Long as One Smiles

“Good grief, just what could this mean...?”

With a furrowed brow, Suimei came to the entrance of the alley leading to his base. The reason for his consternation was the confusing news the knights who’d gone to do reconnaissance had brought back with them.

Yesterday, Suimei and the others managed to defeat the mastermind Romeon without trouble and clear the suspicions against Liliana. Suimei was thinking about his plans from here on out after pulling an all-nighter as surprising information came fluttering to him. A moment ago, as a grim bell rang throughout the city, the husk of Romeon’s body was tied to a stake in the southern plaza. But that was all fine and well. The Empire had a need to declare to the public that the criminal behind the coma incidents had been caught. Even though their response was a bit hasty, it wasn’t unreasonable.

The other thing the knights had reported concerned the leaflets that were passed around to explain to the citizens what had really happened regarding the incidents. It included that Liliana being considered a suspect was a mistake. Not only that, it was written that for the sake of capturing the true criminal, despite that she was being pursued herself, she took a role in his capture. This wasn’t unreasonable either. The higher-ups of the Empire needed to fabricate an appropriate story to explain why they hadn’t been able to apprehend the person who was considered the prime suspect for so long.

However, the fact that official notice came out before even a day had passed, and that it went as far as to clear Liliana’s name and defend her to the general public, made Suimei cock his head.

Right now, the imperial capital was in a far calmer state than when Suimei had first arrived. No matter where he went, people only had praise for Liliana now. It was as if all the animosity for her had vanished in the night. On top of that, there was even talk of the nobles who’d been in a coma regaining consciousness, leaving

Suimei completely stumped. Lefille, who was standing behind Suimei, lifted the brim of her hat and squinted her eyes.

"What an odd story. This is of course the result of something you did, right, Suimei-kun?"

"I can't do that kinda thing. Posting about Romeon on a notice board is easy, but to actually be able to change the minds of the people on something, frankly speaking, is pretty absurd, you know?"

To manipulate the sentiments of an entire city in the span of a scant few hours was ridiculous. The way Suimei could think of to do it would be to place magicka on the notice board to overwrite the sentiments of anyone who saw it. In a sense, it would use the words to infect the populace. The question then was if that was something higher-ups of the Empire could or would do.

It wasn't impossible, but they had no real reason to go out of their way to do it. And whether they had the means to do so was another matter entirely. There was also the matter of how they would be able to hide the fact that magicka had been applied to the notice board. So all things considered, for all of this to have happened so quickly and flawlessly was insane. And while things had cooled down, Suimei was planning on leaving.

"Suimei-kun, it seems nothing will come out of thinking about it more."

"I'm not completely convinced, but I guess we have to give up on figuring it out..."

As he returned to the base with Lefille in tow, Reiji, Felmenia and the others were on their way out. Reiji called out to Suimei when he saw him.

"Is it like we thought, Suimei?"

"Yeah."

As Suimei confirmed briefly that what the knights had told them was indeed the truth, Reiji's expression became quite stern. With a wrinkle between his brows, he let out a dubious groan.

"...What does it all mean?"

"Who knows? No matter how much I think about it, I don't get it, so I ended up just giving up on finding the answer."

"Is that... really alright?"

"It obviously isn't. It isn't, but there's nothing I can do about it."

"Could it be that man's doing?"

"Rogue-san, huh?"

It was certainly possible that Rogue was moving in the shadows, but it was difficult to imagine him managing so much on his own. Besides, he was most likely no longer in the imperial capital.

"Well, it's fine, isn't it? With this, the people of the city don't have to live in fear anymore, so things have improved, at least."

"Suimei, that's kind of irresponsible..."

Reiji slumped his shoulders in disbelief. Suimei was racking his brain over just what was going on, but without a conclusion, it left an unsettling feeling in the pit of his stomach. They'd managed to settle Liliana's case in time, but there were still portions of it he didn't understand. There was also the matter of how Romeon had come to know about savage names. There was nothing left in Romeon's memories that explained it.

Suimei felt like things were in motion somewhere he couldn't see. And he couldn't tell if the forces behind them were bad or good.

"Also, everyone, sorry for this being so sudden, but in two or three days, I'm going to need you all to leave."

Receiving this sudden notice of eviction, Mizuki cried out in a surprised tone.

"W-Wait a sec, Suimei-kun! That's too sudden! Besides, since Liliana-chan's problem has been solved now, there's no need for you and the others to leave the imperial capital, right?"

"That's true. But we'll be going to the Saadias Alliance soon, so you'll need to find somewhere else to stay while you're in the imperial capital."

"The Alliance? Not the self-governed state? Why?"

As Mizuki tilted her head to the side, Reiji answered her as a thought came to mind.

"Is it to find a way to go back to our world?"

"That's right. There was something like that written in the book Menia brought to me earlier."

Hearing this, Titania directed a reproachful look at Suimei.

"Suimei, you say you're looking for a way back, but does that mean that once you find it, you intend to just leave Liliana behind on her own?"

Titania's words for him were more barbed than ever before. But it was understandable. On one hand, Suimei was saying that he would look after Liliana, while on the other, he was saying he

wanted to go back to his world. Hearing them one after the other, they sounded like contradictory statements. But Suimei had thought about this himself.

"Of course not. Once I find a way back, I'll take Liliana with me and properly look after her. It's only reasonable that I do something until she is able to stand on her own, after all."

"Y-Yes, that's... obvious. If Suimei left me and went on his own... it would be a problem!"

"I said it'll be fine."

"Really and truly? For sure?"

In a fluster, Liliana was on the verge of shouting as she worriedly questioned Suimei. Mizuki standing next to her smiled with a broad grin like she'd just found a new weapon.

"She's really attached to you, huh?"

"You really have to say that each and every time..."

It was their usual exchange. Mizuki prodded at him, and Suimei replied like she was off the mark. But then Felmenia stepped in.

"S-Suimei-dono."

As she called out to him, she looked at him with expectant, pleading eyes. Perhaps she wanted to be acknowledged as one of his students too. She looked uncertain and anxious as she waited for an answer, which could only mean...

"Does Menia also want to come?"

"Y-Yes! Of course! If it reaches the point where I can come and go, then without fail!"

She gave an energetic, delighted reply to Suimei's question as if something extraordinarily good had happened. Suimei then looked over his shoulder and asked Lefille the same thing.

"What about Lefi?"

Lefille, however, slightly puffed out her cheeks like she was pouting.

"How cold. You already know I'd go anywhere with you."

"I see."

Lefille had not a single living relative in this world. She had no place to go back to and no place to call home, so Suimei thought it might be nice to bring her back to his world with him.

As all the talking wound down, Suimei headed towards the house on his own. That is, until Felmenia came bounding after him like a puppy. He stopped and looked back at her as he reached the front door.

“Suimei-dono, there is something I would like to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“It is about what you taught me about yesterday, mystical entropy.”

“Ah, that? Yeah, it’s pretty complicated. If you have any questions, just keep them coming.”

Suimei grabbed the doorknob and went inside. Felmenia came in behind him. She seemed to be stumped on something, as she had her head tilted to the side.

“Even if one increases entropy, the ratio of ‘the components that establish mystical laws’ and ‘the components that establish physical laws’ will eventually return to normal, right?”

“Yeah, just like I explained yesterday. Do you have questions about it?”

“But Suimei-dono, if that is the case, then would it not be possible to continuously use magicka to the point where all physical laws in the world are disordered?”

Hearing those words, Suimei stood there stock still with his back turned to her. With his hand on the door to close it, his whole body stiffened. Or rather, it was more like time had completely stopped for him. He was frozen in place.

“…”

“Suimei-dono?”

Felmenia wasn’t sure what was going on. Suimei almost always replied right away, so his current behavior was certainly odd. She had to wonder if the answer was something he didn’t actually know.

“What will you do with that knowledge?”

“Was… Was it not something I should have asked?”

“No, that’s not it… It’s something about our world, so I didn’t think it had much to do with you.”

“…Does it not have something to do with this world as well?”

“I can’t say it definitively. Though honestly, as long as humans are around, there’s an eight or nine out of ten chance…”

“…?”

Felmenia was unable to firmly grasp what Suimei was talking about. As she wrinkled her brow, Suimei began to answer her initial question.

“Just like you said, even when the components that establish mystical and physical laws mix, the large amount of physical

components in the surrounding space will bring the physical laws back into equilibrium. However, the mixing of components is an irreversible phenomenon; it isn't like the components which mixed together returned to their original state."

"So in that case, if one continues to use magicka, would the world eventually enter a state where all laws become disordered?"

"That's right. Even though it returns to its previous state, the place that humans occupy is a closed world. The time where scientific laws, natural order, natural phenomena, and the common sense held by humans all end up a threat will inevitably come. Until then, humans would have to find a means of running away from it, or perhaps if they manage to solve the mysteries of the cosmos..."

"Mysteries of the cosmos...?"

Suimei didn't answer her there, but continued explaining in concepts that Felmenia could understand.

"The world is made of physical laws known as the 'theory of universal eternity.' If those laws are disordered, no matter how many experiments are run, they would be unable to get any results using those laws as a foundation. In other words, at that point, humanity would no longer be able to develop science any further. And when scientific development comes to a stop, the profits from similar academic pursuits would dry up. Development would stop there, too. In the end, even the development of magicka would, since it too is based on the knowledge of the world."

As Suimei continued without prompting, Felmenia got chills like she could tell this was something she shouldn't have touched on. Her expression was filled with tension and fear. Yet Suimei still continued.

"When the development of knowledge is lost, humanity will be unable to attain new knowledge and nothing new will be born. That kind of world is as good as dead. As long as the concept of time exists in the world, humans will always be in a position where they are unable to escape the progress of time. If they lose the ability to oppose the flow of time by creating new things, then it's only a matter of course before they slowly die. A world without development is but a shell of a world. A waste. In other words, this final moment would be when mystical entropy overflows."

Suddenly, an icy feeling crawled down Felmenia's back. Suimei was alluding to things that should be unrelated to this world, but even so, she felt like she was in danger.

“Then... is magicka something that should not exist?”

“No, that’s not the case. Whether or not magicka exists, both the mystical and physical must be kept in balance.”

“Is that possible?”

“No.”

Suimei cut down all hope she had with but a single word. Felmenia looked up at him with anxiety in her eyes.

“I believe I mentioned it when that phenomenon of the end of the world appeared in Astel. The end is predetermined. If magicka continues to develop, then the development of the world will come to an end. If science continues to develop, eventually the world’s resources will dry up and the world will succumb to heat death. Of course, if humanity spreads too much, you can think of them as overflowing the container we call the world. And the pent up resentment I talked to you about before would gather and accelerate the deterioration of the entire world. The use of resources and the development of knowledge, even in a world where the population is controlled, will end a world. But so will stagnation and a lack of development. The short of it is that all born into the world are destined to perish.”

There was no hope. Understanding the gravity of that, Felmenia was rendered speechless. Even if what Suimei was talking about was something that would happen in the distant future, it did not change the fact that everyone in the world would one day meet their end in vain as they slowly went mad and wasted away.

“As long as humans are an intelligent life form, I believe it’s very likely that this world, just like mine, is one ruled by the theory of universal eternity. If you think about it like that...”

“Then our world too will meet its end one day?”

As Suimei turned around, Felmenia was standing there looking up at him with eyes that asked him for answers. She wanted to know what she should do. Just like a teacher looking at a troubled student, he smiled gently at her.

“Well, there’s no reason to be so pessimistic about it. Certainly, the end of the world is predetermined, making it all pretty worthless in the long run. But even so...”

As he said that, Suimei beckoned over Liliana, who was surrounded by Reiji and the others. Seeing that, Liliana slipped out of the circle and walked up to the door.

“Suimei... What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing, really. There’s the case of looking for a means to return to my world, but after all, I think we should look for Rogue too. Having to stay separated from him like this... You hate it, right?”

“Oh... Yes!”

With Suimei gently stroking her head, she had gotten bashful. Seeing that from a distance, Reiji and the others warmly watched over the two of them.

“Ah...”

Having figured out what Suimei was trying to say, Felmenia raised her voice. Seeing this, Suimei put on a smile with a tranquil heart.

“Even if the world is worthless, if even a little bit of it can stay in a state where everyone can smile, isn’t that a good thing?”

Epilogue II: Man of Mirages

While running through the imperial capital at night, Rogue Zandyke recalled the first time he met Liliana. He had gone to suppress an incident that was happening in a small village. At that time, the intelligence division of the army had yet to be established. Rogue was just an officer in the military. Having caught wind of an ominous ritual taking place in a village in the northern part of the Empire, he moved out with his subordinates to investigate.

He was not sure what exactly the ritual entailed, but in its wake, an ominous being appeared in the vicinity and the corpses of many children began to pop up here and there. After investigating the nearby villages, they learned it was a tradition passed down over the generations. Every year, they would sacrifice cursed children to an evil being different from the Evil God Zekaraia.

When they arrived at the village in question, they were in the middle of performing the ritual. Magic circles were drawn in blood all over the place. The ritual involved all of the villagers, and they were gathered around a single person, spilling all kinds of hateful words from their mouths.

The victim of all this was Liliana, who was still a small child. Even her actual parents who should have been affectionate were part of the cheering crowd. They all treated her like a monster. At the shrine where the ritual took place, the people swarmed the huddled up and trembling girl. He could still remember the primal glitter of her right eye.

When the soldiers tried to stop the ritual, the villagers attacked them. They said that if the ritual did not take place, then evil would assault the village. Before anyone realized it, the villagers had all lost their minds. Perhaps it was an effect of Liliana's darkness. Rogue didn't know if it was natural or something more. But either way, he couldn't stand for what they were doing. Ganging up on a small child to deny her happiness shouldn't be allowed to happen. It wasn't something people should be allowed to do. After suppressing the rampaging villagers, the shaman at the center of the ritual left

behind a few dying words of warning for Rogue.

"That girl is a child with the natural ability to curse others... Eventually all of humanity will be harmed by her..."

Thinking back on it, the shaman's words may have been a curse in and of themselves when Rogue took Liliana with him. They always loomed in the back of his mind. Deep down, he must have also thought of Liliana as cursed. And after how he'd treated her, he no longer had the right to stand by her side. He regretted that he had to let her go, but he was sure that if he entrusted her to that young man who had always believed in her, she would surely be able to live happily.

The young man had told him that even if he wasn't connected by blood, that if he considered himself her father, he should have acted like it to the end. He should believe in his own family. That was the source of the young man's anger. But Rogue hadn't been able to believe in her. Completely caught up only in what was happening, he'd abandoned the girl he once saved with his own hands.

"..."

As he looked back at the place he was running from, Liliana's voice rang in his head.

"Colonel, why do you always... have to take nothing but painful jobs?"

When he thought about it, Liliana may have always sympathized with him.

"Colonel, if I become a soldier... would I be useful to you?"

When he thought about it, Liliana may have wholeheartedly wanted to be of help to him.

"Colonel, why do the nobles... hate you so much?"

Yes, when he thought about it, everything she asked him was always out of concern for him.

Rogue was ostracized by the nobles. She'd caught wind of it and figured out what a hard time he was having. Liliana was a smart child, after all. That must have been why she tried to save him. It was laughable. To think that he would only understand her thoughtfulness and sorrow after all this time... That was exactly why he had no right to call himself her father.

And he no longer had any room to criticize her. Surely that brilliant radiance from the falling stars had washed everything away. But it was not yet over. He still had something that he must

do. If Liliana was to live in tranquility and peace, the source of evil known as the nobility would have to be taken care of. Even if that young man was with her, some sort of retribution would surely await them. And so, as the one who drove Liliana to such violence, he had to make his move. Holding those thoughts in his heart, he quietly looked at the sky.

"Even though I have the desire, it doesn't go the way I want..."

Just why was this world so hard only on those who were weak? It only granted pain to those who lived properly and stole their happiness away. As he turned these questions to the sky, there was no sign of any answer coming back to him. No, instead what he heard was an unfamiliar voice.

"One of the Seven Swords and a colonel of the imperial army's intelligence division... Rogue Zandyke-dono, correct?"

Rogue lowered his gaze. A single man had appeared on the path in front of him. With long, light purple hair, he had something of a transient air about him. His clothing was also unfamiliar to Rogue, but he could tell it was expensive and elegant. The man was quite skinny, but even under his flowing clothes that looked like the customary dress of some country's nobles, Rogue could sense that his body was trained. As Rogue shot a vigilant stare at that man before him, the man threw him back a question with no context.

"What do you think of this world?"

Not knowing what this man's intentions were by asking such a thing, Rogue returned with a question of his own.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you not also think that the way of this world is simply irrational?"

"..."

Feeling like the innermost thoughts deep in his heart had been revealed, Rogue's body stiffened for an instant. However, he quickly regained his composure and warded off the man's words as nonsense.

"There is no way I would have complaints about the world the Goddess Alshuna made."

"That is a falsehood."

"What makes you say that?"

Rogue shot yet another question at the man whose face said he knew everything. And as he replied, his expression didn't change.

"Is it not? If it is not a falsehood, then all those times you

thought of your daughter as you begged the Goddess in prayer every day for a wish that would never be granted would end up being the falsehood."

"So you know about that..."

Taken aback by the man's conjecture, Rogue unwittingly ended up acknowledging what he said. It was true. He'd prayed for Liliana's body that was being eaten away to be healed by the Goddess. Every morning, without fail, he would walk over to the Church of Salvation. However, no matter how many prayers he offered, they were never heard.

"Though it may be presumptuous, I do believe I understand your feelings towards the world," the man said, pointing his cold gray eyes right at Rogue. "This miniature garden created by the Goddess is made to be irrational. Is that not why demons exist? The existence of the Goddess itself is a cluster of irrationality, after all."

In this world where the Goddess was worshiped as everything virtuous, this man was showing contempt for her without an ounce of hesitation. He must have had a reason to claim all this so loudly, despite the fact that if anyone heard him, he would be treated as suspicious immediately.

"Zandyke-dono, I would like you to lend us your power."

"What do you intend to do with my power?"

"You already know. If the Goddess spreads irrationality, we will fight against her and change the world."

The words coming out of the man's mouth were akin to scheming to usurp a god. Anyone who heard it would be stunned. This included Rogue. His voice as he questioned the man was filled with bewilderment.

"Ridiculous. Are you suggesting you mean to kill the Goddess? That's impossible."

"I mean to do so. And to that end, I would like your support."

Rogue stared at the man in front of him. He'd appeared, spoken ill of the Goddess, and was now asking for his help. Rogue felt like he seemed as firm as a rock in his beliefs. He was going to change the world. He would correct the irrationality of it. There was something about him that made it clear he wasn't just a con artist.

Right now, Rogue had nowhere to go and nobody waiting for him. He had not thought at all about what he would do after he finished doing what he must. However, what this man was suggesting, to break down what had been causing Rogue to lament

in grief, may not have been a bad proposition to hop on to. Preparing to give a nod to the man, Rogue began to speak at ease.

"Then there is one thing that I would like to ask."

"Speak."

"It is about my daughter. Right now, there is a threat to her that must be cleared away. I want it removed as soon as possible. If it is done, I will lend you my sword."

Rogue presented his conditions. He knew it was an unreasonable demand, but if this man had the power to defy a god, then such a request would be simple. It would prove all his talk wasn't just talk. So in a way, Rogue's demand was a test. However, the man nodded without the slightest hesitation.

"I have heard your wish. By tomorrow morning, all those who would shun Liliana Zandyke will vanish from this imperial capital," he declared.

Rogue had no idea just what was backing this man's confidence, but he would know come the next morning. Thinking of this, he realized there was still something he had yet to ask.

"My apologies, but one more thing."

"What is it?"

"I do not know the name of the one I will be lending my sword to."

Hearing this, a smile suddenly floated onto the man's face. Was it simple joy? Or perhaps he was truly happy deep down? Rogue couldn't grasp the nuance of his expression, but the man answered him quietly.

"My name is Gottfried. Please feel free to call me as such."

With that, the man—Gottfried—turned to leave.

Afterword

If perhaps the world couldn't be explained by the theory of universal eternity, just what would happen?

"Even if you ask what would happen, in the end Earth would just keep spinning normally, dumbass!"

While quipping at myself with that, it is good to see everyone again. This is Gamei Hitsuji. It has been four months since the third volume went on sale, and I have once more discovered how difficult it is to write a novel. I feel exhausted.

The story this time around follows up from the third volume, and brings a conclusion to the Empire arc. What happened to Liliana-chan after she vanished? What about Suimei, who was reduced to a tattered rag? What about the conclusion of the incident?! That's basically what we cover here.

And also, compared to the third volume, there's a lot of fighting! But it should be about time where everyone wants some more in-depth scenes with the characters, so I must humbly apologize. I wanted to write these fight scenes, so please forgive me. There's a lot of heated development too, so I hope you can overlook it.

Graziella, Elliot, Suimei, Felmenia, Lefille, and even you-know-who will fight in this volume! She's quite the tomboy! And don't forget about Liliana! She's too cute in this volume.

There's also the bit about mystical entropy in the thick of this volume. It's a theory that makes you wonder what exactly it is. Well, I guess that's a given. There's no such law, after all. Please just think of it as the rare symptoms of the illness the author came down with in middle school growing worse as I get busier.

Rather than normal entropy, which is about measuring chaos, this is more about returning to normal, or not... Sort of. Well, mystical entropy has all kinds of aspects to it, so this time around it should be fine to think of it that way for the sake of explaining it to Felmenia...

Going back to what we were talking about before: there is a

physical law in this world called the theory of universal eternity. But because there are things that physical laws cannot explain, Suimei-kun and the other magicians are trying to dispel the ways of the world using a different approach known as mystical laws.

In this world, there are things that cannot be explained by physical laws. The mechanisms behind the outbreak of lightning, the expansion of space, or apocalyptic sounds. In that case, those physical laws that we use as a foundation are maybe not the necessary "proper measure" to truly explain all phenomena and events in the world. In truth, it's just that the results that come about largely coincide with the theories of physical laws, so really, in truth, there's probably a better theory out there, and maybe humans have simply yet to reach that.

So... from that way of thinking, magicians discover mystical laws, give birth to new ones, take hold of those laws, and the techniques they wield become magicka. The universal key needed to reach the truth that unravels the Akashic Record that the magicians strive for is one of those laws, and once they take hold of it, they become omnipotent. That was written in a grimoire...

This is steadily veering off course, so let's put a stop to the complicated talk right here.

More importantly is the drama CD! That's right, the drama CD! This is great. My brains are leaking out! I was present for several of the recordings, but I feel like all I was ever saying was, "Voice actors are amazing..."

What I feel extremely sorry about would be the chants, though... Even as they recited chants that really felt like magic without showing any discomfort on their faces, I asked them to retake them because the pacing or pronunciation was off. I'm really sorry about that.

In the drama CD, there's a scene of the chants that come up in volume four, so I thought that if you bought it together with volume four it would put a grin on your face. I am overcome with such a playful mood.

And so I am deeply grateful to be able to deliver yet another volume out to everyone. To the ones who took part in the production of the drama CD this time around, Brave Heart-sama, Tsukuru no Mori-sama, and the one who cooperated in producing the scenario, Tokita Shakeh-sama... Thank you so truly much.

Also, in regards to the fourth volume, to the illustrator himesuz-

sama, the designer Horiehideaki-sama, the chief editor S-sama, the proofreading company Oraidou-sama... Thank you so truly much too.

-Gamei Hitsuji

Bonus Short Story: The Terror of the Marionette Spell

On a certain day, Society magician Yakagi Suimei was visiting Hydemary Alzbayne's room at the Society's headquarters.

Standing in front of the old-fashioned wooden door, he used the knocker modelled after an ouroboros. Hydemary's flat voice called back to him before long, and Suimei opened the door and stepped inside. A gentle rosewood fragrance filled the room, which was uniformly decorated with white antique furniture. It impressed a sense of tranquility on Suimei, but at the same time, it gave the place a strange atmosphere.

The same as always, a girl with long, black hair dressed in very magician-like clothing was seated at the table. She appeared to be doing some needlework.

"Welcome, Suimei-kun. What's the matter?"

Without stopping what she was doing, Hydemary didn't even look up at him as she spoke. It looked like she was sewing together some pieces of cloth, but Suimei paid it no mind and cut straight to the chase.

"Nothing major. I just came to talk about tomorrow."

"About tomorrow? It's just the same as always, right? At the request of the Thousand Nights Association, we have to go and restrain a magician for some reason or another."

Hydemary spoke with the cynicism of someone who knew what they were in for.

"...It's true it's business as usual, but I want to discuss how we're going to go about it."

"What a pain. No way. I'm busy right now."

"Hey now..."

"I mean, we just have to capture them like always, and hand them over to that shady-looking person like always, right?"

"Well, yeah."

"Then what is there to discuss? We can make our preparations

while we're on the way tomorrow."

In other words, Hydemary had completely no interest in talking about work. It wasn't like Suimei didn't understand how she felt, but...

"So, what've you got there?"

"This? This, you see, is a Suimei-kun doll."

"Hmm, a doll of me? A doll of me, huh..."

He always thought that she was rather commendable. To think she was making a doll of him...

"Wait, a doll of me?!"

"That's right. Why are you so surprised?"

"Why wouldn't I be?! It's a doll! A doll! The hell are you doing?!" Suimei yelled in a shrill voice.

A doll. If there was an official ranking of items magicians didn't want anyone to possess, that would take the top spot by a large margin.

"Heehee, look. Here it is."

What Hydemary proudly showed Suimei was a rather adorable stuffed doll with a large head.

"What's with that? No, could it be that... Did the monster in the basement give you that or something?"

"The professor? Oh, no. I made it myself."

"Come on! Why would you make that kinda crap?!"

"Isn't the answer obviously for amusement? What other reason could there be?"

"Just how is that amusing?! It's a doll of me, you know?!"

"You see... How do I put it? To be able to toy with the always snippy Suimei-kun in the palm of my hands will *definitely* be amusing."

"Stop right there! There isn't an ounce of amusement in that!"

"Moreover, it has an amazing function added to it."

Hearing that, Suimei looked at Hydemary with a mix of suspicion and terror.

"Hey... What do you mean by 'function'? Seriously, what function? I have a super bad feeling about this."

"It's probably right on the mark."

"Burn that thing right now! This instant!"

"No way. I finally made it several hundred... No, several thousand times cuter than the original. Besides, there's that function I mentioned."

“Listen to people when they— Ugh!”

As Hydemary threw up both arms of the stuffed doll, Suimei mimicked the action. It was as if his arms were being forcefully yanked upward by giant, invisible hands.

“‘Ugh’? Tsk, grunting like that.... Suimei-kun, as a magician, you need to be more elegant.”

“Y-You son of a... Making crap with that kind of compelling force in it...”

“If I’m going to do something, then I’m going do it properly. So, how is it? Has this once more impressed my genius upon you?”

Suimei had to concede to that.

“...Yeah.”

“Heh, so it seems you finally understand.”

“With the caveat that nobody, friend and foe alike, should ever let their fucking guard down around you.”

As a rather unhappy Suimei cursed at her, Hydemary simply acted as if it had nothing to do with her.

“Yes, yes. Carelessness is one’s greatest enemy. You can’t forget that even girls as beautiful as flowers still have thorns, just like roses. All pleasure comes with some pain, you see.”

“And just where is the pleasure in this?”

“Me, of course. To be able to chat with such a cute girl is nothing other than a pleasure, is it not? Especially for you.”

“Don’t make me out to be some sad loser who has no luck with women.”

“Am I wrong?”

“Please just stop...”

Hydemary cocked her head to the side and waited, but Suimei could offer no argument. It was true. He didn’t have enough luck with women to definitively say that he wasn’t a loser. He was jealous of his friends in Japan. Thinking about all of this, Suimei realized that there was something else he should be asking her about instead.

“Actually, how the hell did you make that thing?”

“I just gathered the standard components like your hair, blood, nail clippings, and so on. That’s all.”

“Don’t collect that kind of shit!”

“My, my... When you say I’m *collecting* them, doesn’t that make me sound like some kind of pervert? It was for magickal research. Look, a female panther pose.”

Setting the stuffed doll on all fours, Hydemary stretched out its back.

“Damn it! Stop it! Aaaaah!”

Suimei’s body mercilessly complied, imitating the pose against his will. No matter how much he struggled, he was unable to escape the stuffed doll’s magickal power and the laws of resonance her sensory resonance magicka used. Watching Suimei turn bright red as he was compelled to strike such an embarrassing pose, Hydemary commented with her typical indifferent expression.

“My, my, this is even more amusing than I thought.”

“I’m not amused at all!”

Suimei got in a retort, but Hydemary’s rampage was far from over.

“Poke, poke...”

“Wh-Where the hell do you think you’re poking?!”

“Somewhere... intimate? Poke, poke.”

Hydemary was poking a certain somewhere on the doll with her index finger. Suimei tried to object in a flustered panic, but it was already too late.

“Hrk!”

Suimei’s face went from bright red to ghastly pale as he grabbed his crotch and sank to the floor pigeon-toed.

“Ah, you collapsed in agony.”

“Hrgh... You asshole. That’s really fucking crossing the line...”

“Sorry, sorry. I suppose it is a man’s weakness after all, huh?”

“You son of a... I’ll remember this...”

Suimei glared at Hydemary spitefully as she apologized. Then, standing in front of Suimei who was still in agony, Hydemary bent over as if taking a closer look. And then, in a sinister tone...

“Hmm, is that really something you should be saying to me considering the position you’re in?”

“Wh-What...? What’re you gonna do?”

“No matter how you look at it, I *am* a genius. I can easily think of any number of ways to do something as trivial as plunging you into the very depths of terror.”

“Wait, you... What the hell are you planning?!”

“Now, here we go. Let’s try a spread eagle pose, Suimei-kun.”

“STOP THAAAAAAAAAAT!”

Suimei screamed, but there was nobody there to stop such tyranny.

Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing volume 4 of *The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind!* All kinds of magics have now made their appearance in this story, and another eccentric magic theory has burst onto the scene! I'll be writing the continuation of the story steadily from here on too, so please look forward to more of *The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind!* in the future!

-Gamei Hitsuji

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by Gamei Hitsuji

Translated by Hikoki
Edited by Morgan Dreher

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